



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

WEDNESDAY — 12 JAN 2022



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HEADLINE	01/12 Omicron uncertainty Beijing Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/world/asia/beijing-olympics-covid.html
GIST	<p>The Winter Olympics are three weeks away, but tickets have yet to go on sale. Airlines are shifting schedules, creating travel confusion. Now, a spate of coronavirus outbreaks around China — including some locally transmitted cases of the fast-spreading Omicron variant — is adding to the uncertainty ahead of the Games in Beijing.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, more than 20 million people remained confined to their homes in at least five cities around China. Especially worrying for officials has been a recent flare-up in Tianjin, a port city just 70 miles from Beijing that Chinese state media have previously likened to a “moat” protecting the country’s capital.</p> <p>Officials have yet to determine the source of the Tianjin outbreak that infected 137 people, including at least two with the Omicron variant. One local health official said that the virus appeared to have been spreading in the community “for some time.” On Wednesday, officials in Tianjin ordered a second round of mass testing of all 14 million residents.</p> <p>The surge in infections even before the arrival of thousands of athletes, journalists and officials underscores the challenge Chinese organizers face in trying to hold the Games while sticking to Beijing’s “zero Covid” standards. The country is one of the few left in the world that chases the elimination of the virus, despite the harsh measures needed and the cost imposed on the economy and people’s lives.</p> <p>Even before Omicron emerged, Beijing’s Games were never going to be a typical affair. The health protocols organizers laid out in the fall had already made it clear that the Games, which are scheduled to begin on Feb. 4, would be the most extraordinarily restricted large-scale sporting event since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>People who are unvaccinated will have to spend their first 21 days in Beijing in solitary quarantine. Fully vaccinated participants will be required to remain in a tightly managed “closed-loop” bubble from the moment they arrive in Beijing to the time they leave. They also must present two negative tests before arrival, take tests daily and submit health reports to the authorities using a mobile app.</p> <p>Despite the recent outbreaks, the organizers appear determined to deliver the “green, safe and simple” Games that China’s authoritarian leader, Xi Jinping, called for last week. Officials said the authorities so far had no plans to lock down Beijing, or to change either the Olympics schedule or virus-control measures in response to Omicron.</p> <p>“Whatever difficulties and challenges we may encounter, our determination to host a successful Games as planned remains firm and unwavering,” Zhao Weidong, the organizing committee spokesman, said on Tuesday.</p> <p>But some basic questions remain, including how to allow fans to attend. Officials have said only residents of mainland China would be allowed as spectators, and that they should only clap — not cheer.</p> <p>At the Tokyo Games last summer, more than 400 infections were recorded in the bubble; China is going to great lengths to limit the risk of an outbreak. Anyone in the bubble who tests positive must stay in a high-security government hospital or quarantine facility until two lab tests — also known as P.C.R. tests — at least 24 hours apart find no more trace of the virus, which can take weeks.</p> <p>Officials also acknowledged concerns among residents that infections could occur within the bubble and then spread outside. On Sunday, Beijing traffic authorities urged residents to stay away from any collisions involving vehicles from the closed-loop bubble, saying that a special unit of ambulances would respond to such accidents.</p>

For the Chinese government, a lot is at stake. Beijing's zero-tolerance approach relies on mass testing, stringent border controls, expansive surveillance, contact tracing, extensive quarantines and lockdowns to tame sporadic outbreaks.

That strategy has drawn criticism at times, as in the city of [Xi'an last month](#), when residents complained of food shortages and being denied urgent medical care. But it retains widespread public support. And Beijing has used its success to assert the superiority of its top-down authoritarian system compared with Western democracies, which have struggled to contain outbreaks.

This month, China ordered the cancellation of more than two dozen scheduled flights from the United States after several passengers tested positive for the coronavirus after arriving in China. The government also recently stepped up its already onerous restrictions for inbound travelers. Starting on Thursday, travelers coming from the United States, for example, will be required to present at least two negative tests and monitor their health for seven days in their departure city before flying to China.

Yanzhong Huang, director of the Center for Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University, said that for Beijing, the Olympics were an opportunity not only to showcase China's athletic achievements but also to validate its "zero Covid" approach to the virus.

"If they can pull this off without causing any major outbreaks, it would be another gold medal that China would be happy to claim," Mr. Huang said.

Getting back to zero local transmissions before the Olympics may be hard. On Monday, Anyang, a city of five million in China's central Henan Province, was locked down after recording 58 cases. At least two Omicron cases were traced to a student who had traveled from Tianjin on Dec. 28, suggesting that the variant had already been circulating in the two cities for nearly two weeks.

And the source of some of the recent outbreaks remains unclear. In Shenzhen, officials blamed contaminated packaging of imported products for a recent spread of the Delta variant, prompting city authorities on Monday to warn residents not to buy goods from high-risk countries. (Studies show that transmission of the virus from packaging is extremely rare.)

Recognizing the challenge, some Chinese health experts have recently backed away from emphasizing the "zero Covid" goal.

"Right now we don't yet have the ability to ensure that there are zero local cases," said Liang Wannian, a senior official of China's National Health Commission, according to [state media reports](#). "But we do have the ability and the confidence to quickly extinguish local cases when we find them."

Even with China's formidable contact-tracing capacity and high vaccination rates, Omicron could prove especially elusive, given the short window in which positive cases can be detected. Studies have also suggested that the two major Chinese vaccines, made by Sinovac and Sinopharm, are [not as effective](#) in preventing infection of the Omicron variant. (Chinese authorities have so far approved only Chinese vaccines.)

With the Olympics on the horizon, the Beijing government has urged people to refrain from unnecessary travel to the capital. The city's health authorities are also asking residents to report themselves to the authorities if they have been to any areas recently affected by outbreaks. This week, Beijing was also one of several Chinese cities where officials said residents should stay put during the coming Lunar New Year holiday, typically the busiest travel week of the year.

"Zero Covid is becoming more and more difficult for the Chinese authorities to achieve, but it's still achievable," said Jin Dongyan, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong. "It just comes with a high price — to people's everyday life and to the economy."

	<p>Games organizers are hoping that technology might help to minimize human interaction. They have tested robots that brew coffee, make deliveries and clean surfaces — R2-D2 look-alikes that spray disinfectant.</p> <p>There is even Xiaobai, or “Little White,” a waist-high robot that can detect when someone is not wearing a mask and nag the rule-flouter into compliance. Equipped with six wheels and a disinfectant dispenser, Little White is ready to take on the challenge of the Games, Li Xinglong, one of its inventors, suggested in an announcement on the official Beijing Winter Olympics website.</p> <p>“Little White,” Mr. Li said, “is not afraid of the cold.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Oil demand outstrips supply; prices to rise?
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/oil-prices-could-hit-100-demand-outstrips-supply-analysts-say-2022-01-12/
GIST	<p>LONDON, Jan 12 (Reuters) - Oil prices that rallied 50% in 2021 will power further ahead this year, analysts predict, saying a lack of production capacity and limited investment in the sector could lift crude above \$100 a barrel.</p> <p>Though the Omicron coronavirus variant has pushed COVID-19 cases far above peaks hit last year, analysts say oil prices will be supported by the reluctance of many governments to restore the strict restrictions that hammered the global economy when the pandemic took hold in 2020.</p> <p>Brent crude futures traded above \$84 on Wednesday, hitting two-month highs.</p> <p>"Assuming China doesn't suffer a sharp slowdown, that Omicron actually becomes Omi-gone, and with OPEC+'s ability to raise production clearly limited, I see no reason why Brent crude cannot move towards \$100 in Q1, possibly sooner," said Jeffrey Halley, senior market analyst at OANDA.</p> <p>The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies, a group known as OPEC+, are gradually relaxing the output cuts implemented when demand collapsed in 2020.</p> <p>However, many smaller producers can't raise supply and others have been wary of pumping too much oil in case of renewed COVID-19 setbacks.</p> <p>"We don't want to see \$100 a barrel. The world is not ready for that," Omani Oil Minister Mohammed Al Rumhi was quoted as saying by Bloomberg on Tuesday.</p> <p>Morgan Stanley predicts that Brent crude will hit \$90 a barrel in the third quarter of this year.</p> <p>With the prospect of depleting crude inventories and low spare capacity by the second half of 2022, and limited investments in the oil and gas sector, the market will have little margin of safety, the bank said.</p> <p>Standard Chartered, meanwhile, has raised its 2022 Brent forecast by \$8 to \$75 a barrel and its 2023 Brent forecast by \$17 to \$77.</p> <p>J.P. Morgan analysts also expects oil prices to rise as high as \$90 by the end of the year.</p> <p>Current demand strength is acting as a near-term tailwind, having proved largely immune to surging coronavirus infections, the bank said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 WSDOT: safety concerns not staffing issues
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/weather/severe-weather/wsdot-safety-concerns-pass-closures/293-3a3ca20a-78ec-4251-8565-2dd73f1cbf4a

GIST	<p>SNOQUALMIE PASS, Wash. — The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) had to close all of the state's mountain passes last week amid a historic snowstorm, leaving drivers and freight with no land route from one side of the state to the other.</p> <p>In the case of Snoqualmie Pass, the four-day closure was one of its longest, but not unprecedented.</p> <p>"History repeats itself," said Meagan Lott, WSDOT Spokesperson. "We saw similar conditions back in 2008, 1996, and 1990, with extended closures, with similar closures."</p> <p>With the long closure, some people have questioned if the length of the closure was influenced by a staffing shortage caused by Gov. Jay Inslee's vaccine mandate. According to Lott, that isn't the case.</p> <p>There have been four-day closures of Snoqualmie Pass in the past, with the most recent one being in 2008. WSDOT data shows that the four-day closure in 2008 started on a day when the snow accumulation was the same as the first day of last week's closure. Snoqualmie had seen a foot of new snow on Jan. 29, 2008, just a couple inches less than the new snow total last Thursday.</p> <p>COVID-19 and Inslee's vaccine mandate that stemmed from it didn't exist at that time.</p> <p>"We could have an unlimited amount of employees, but when you're dealing with that type of weather, it doesn't matter how much staff you have," Lott said. "It's going to be a challenge."</p> <p>Lott said WSDOT had about 1,500 employees before the pandemic. Not counting other reasons for leaving, she said the department lost about 403 employees due to the mandate, but through rehiring efforts, are now only down a total of about 140 staff members since Inslee's deadline.</p> <p>The extended closure was instead due to safety concerns, according to Lott.</p> <p>"We're dealing with avalanche danger, we were dealing with several feet of snow accumulating on overhead signs that we didn't want falling onto traffic moving underneath," she said. "We also had crews seeing trees fall as they were plowing snow and hearing trees crack as they're out on the road."</p> <p>Lott also said WSDOT moves crews around to accommodate severe weather events like last week's storm. She added that the department actually had enough staff to operate all of the available equipment on the passes, so more employees wouldn't have sped up clearing efforts.</p> <p>KREM reached out to the Washington Federation of State Employees, which is the union representing those working for WSDOT, through multiple methods, but have not heard back.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Leavenworth digs out of record snowfall
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/weather/leavenworth-continues-to-dig-out-of-record-snowfall/281-d220e674-bf1c-4ca9-9569-5f93b7bf31ae
GIST	<p>LEAVENWORTH, Wash. — The town of Leavenworth is still digging out after historic snowfall over the weekend that left many with no option but to wait out the weather.</p> <p>Four feet of snow fell in 48 hours, an unprecedented amount that essentially brought the area to a standstill.</p> <p>Crews, city snow plows, and contractors have been working around the clock to move truckloads of snow to any available empty lot.</p> <p>"We got freezing rain this morning which on top of the snow makes things very icy. There were cars going off the road all over the county. And that ice stretched as far east as Spokane," said Christie Voos, a spokesperson for the City of Leavenworth.</p>

	<p>On Tuesday, the National Guard put in a full day of work. The primary goal of the National Guard is wellness checks. Members knocked on 250 doors in Chelan County as many residents haven't been able to leave home due to all the snowfall. National Guard members are also delivering food and helping to shovel as needed.</p> <p>On Tuesday night, the attention turned to the forecast, with freezing rain predicted that could mean an increased risk of avalanche danger in the mountains and the possibility of flooding.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Steven Pass west of Leavenworth remains closed from the west end of the city to seven miles east of Skykomish due to heavy snow accumulation and extreme avalanche danger. The Washington State Department of Transportation reported it was unlikely the pass would reopen before Jan. 12.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Health officials: dire situation
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/top-health-officials-sound-alarm-again-about-covid-19-case-count-surge
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — Health leaders in Western Washington on Tuesday said the state is approaching a dire situation as the number of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations set new records.</p> <p>Although there is some hope on the horizon, those health officials caution that it is going to be much worse before it gets better.</p> <p>MultiCare Health System officials say their hospitals are overflowing, especially on the westside of the state than Eastern Washington, which is at 100 percent capacity. Western Washington is at 130 percent capacity.</p> <p>“This is the worst any of us have ever seen,” said June Altaras, spokesperson for MultiCare Health System. “People probably wonder how you can be at 130 percent capacity? It’s because patients that should be in hospital rooms are in emergency departments and patients that should be in the emergency department phase are in tents.”</p> <p>“What’s interesting is that it is very focused in Western Washington,” said Dr. Steve Mitchell, Harborview Medical Center. “Our colleagues in central Washington and Eastern Washington have not yet experienced this surge, but we know it’s coming for them, sadly.”</p> <p>And it’s not just Western Washington as a whole, but the most populous counties of King, Pierce and Snohomish.</p> <p>“Trying to convey how dire the situation is,” said Dr. Chris Spitters, the top health official for Snohomish County. “Having observed the health care systems closely during the full course of the pandemic, I must tell you at no time at no time has the healthcare system status been more precarious and each of our access to acute care been in greater peril.”</p> <p>Hospital officials said FEMA has brought in 200 federal staff members to help with more arriving in the next several days.</p> <p>The exploding case counts has led to drastic actions to serve patients.</p> <p>“Because of the historically high hospital census that we’ve experienced recently and our challenging staffing situation, Providence Everett has set up an onsite emergency command center to coordinate the staffing, supplies and resources needed to make sure that patients can receive that safe care that they need,” said Dr. Jay Cook of Providence Everett.</p>

	<p>Not only are the hospitals full, but health leaders say the quick spread even to those who are vaccinated has led to staff shortages as people quarantine for 10 days.</p> <p>“Our teams are tired and we’re doing everything we can and we need our community’s help,” Altaras said. “We really need our communities to get vaccinated, get their boosters.”</p> <p>Because health officials don’t want to get to the point of needing ‘crisis standards of care’ where they have to pick who to treat and who not to.</p> <p>“We are doing everything we can to avoid getting to that place,” Mitchell said. “Could we get to that place? Yes. Are we closer than we were even last week? Yes, we are sadly. But everybody in health care is doing everything we can to stave that off.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 High number unreported Covid cases?
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/covid-19-testing-sites-in-washington-overwhelmed-with-recent-surge-of-covid-19-cases
GIST	<p>COVID-19 testing sites around western Washington have been pushed to their limits as cases have skyrocketed.</p> <p>Brand new numbers from the state department of health show nearly 14,000 new cases in the last day, continuing the trend since Christmas. But doctors said the infection rate could actually be much higher than the numbers indicate, because the stats don’t include unreported positive cases.</p> <p>“Many cases are out there [are] undetected,” said Ali Mokdad, Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation Chief Strategy Officer. “People could be going to their office right now and they could be infectious.”</p> <p>UW’s IHME states a huge chunk of covid cases in Washington are likely going undetected, projecting the state’s daily count is just a fraction of the number of people who are actually sick.</p> <p>“If you test 10 people in Seattle right now, very likely four of them will be infected,” Mokdad said.. “Our detection rate is much lower right now because we have a high volume of cases and limited capacity of testing.”</p> <p>He said the IHME relies on community surveys and data to project just how many people are infected with the virus, both reported and unreported.</p> <p>“We take a random sample of blood, donating blood, for example, at the Red Cross, and we test them to see how many of them have been infected,” he said. “And, we account for vaccine and waning immunity.”</p> <p>In fact, IHME projected the number of new cases Tuesday was 88,000, more than six times what the state is reporting.</p> <p>He believes the state will hit its peak before the end of the month, with some relief in February.</p> <p>“By mid-February, our hospitals will have peaked and come down and then our cases will be coming down by that time, reported cases,” Mokdad said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Snohomish Co. official: Covid everywhere
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/snohomish-health-officer-on-covid-as-school-staffs-take-hit-its-everywhere-now
GIST	EDMONDS, Wash. - Educators are determined to keep schools open in 2021, but with COVID-19 cases spiking in various communities, temporary remote plans are becoming a reality.

This week, three high schools in the Lake Washington School District shifted to remote learning, while the entire Aberdeen School District is doing the same.

In Edmonds, the superintendent is warning parents that remote learning is possible. An e-mail sent late Monday warned of the possibility of a temporary shift due to a rise in COVID-19 cases. In the interim, they've cut snack breaks to avoid the amount of time children aren't wearing masks while also postponing concerts.

WIAA events will continue, but bus routes for afterschool activities have been cut for middle and high school students.

Parents and students have been told to bring school-assigned computers to-and-from school, so they can make a quick pivot to remote if needed. The plan would include an initial teacher-work day, followed up by an immediate start of remote work.

Asked how to prepare, the District said: make sure you keep students home if they feel sick.

"That's the biggest message we want to get out there," said Harmony Weinberg, a spokesperson for Edmonds Public Schools. "The other part would be to have that backup plan for the possibility of remote learning for a short period of time."

Parents tell FOX 13 that they aren't excited with the prospect of remote learning, but seemed to understand the health risks schools currently face.

"Ultimately it's about the safety of our students, staff, everyone in the community," said Jennifer Kwong, a parent with a high-risk child in the Edmonds School District.

"As much as I don't like them having to be home, if that's what's best for them and every else that's what it needs to be," said Heather Lee.

According to the District, there's only two reasons they'll make the call to shift to remote. If the Department of Health tells them to do so, or if they've lost too much of their staff to continue to safely operate a school.

Dr. Chris Spitters, the Snohomish County Health Officer, said on Tuesday that staffing shortage was the only reason that he saw for closing schools at this point of the pandemic. While that may sound good to some parents, he noted that's because the virus is widespread – meaning that despite increased infections at schools, they're no more/less dangerous than other places right now.

"It's everywhere now," said Dr. Spitters. "A school closing down wouldn't mitigate the impact on society."

If you'd like to read more about Edmonds School District backup plan for remote learning, you can find a letter from Superintendent Dr. Balderas, [here](#).

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HEADLINE	01/11 Schools return to online learning
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/list-schools-return-to-online-learning-amid-surge-of-covid-cases
GIST	SEATTLE - Schools in Western Washington are opting to return once again to online learning, as another surge in COVID-19 cases has left hundreds of students and staff in quarantine. Several schools will return to remote learning on Wednesday. Reasons vary from high COVID transmission to too many staff members being quarantined to effectively hold class. Other schools are

	<p>simply canceling classes due to low staffing. Currently, the online switch only looks to be temporary, with most schools planning to return in-person after a week.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Franklin High School: Remote learning starting Wednesday, Jan. 12; in-person learning will resume Jan. 18. • Bothell High School: Remote learning starting Wednesday, Jan. 12; in-person learning will resume after the weekend on Jan. 24. • Lowell Elementary: Remote learning starting Wednesday, Jan. 12; in-person learning will resume Jan. 20. • Kimball Elementary: Closed with no remote learning.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Media rethinks pandemic data to report
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-arts-and-entertainment-media-pandemics-da9272f7c4c8a109c3bfb56bed9e9c76
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — For two years, coronavirus case counts and hospitalizations have been widely used barometers of the pandemic’s march across the world.</p> <p>But the omicron wave is making a mess of the usual statistics, forcing news organizations to rethink the way they report such figures.</p> <p>“It’s just a data disaster,” said Katherine Wu, staff writer who covers COVID-19 for The Atlantic magazine.</p> <p>The number of case counts soared over the holidays, an expected development given the emergence of a variant more transmissible than its predecessors.</p> <p>Yet these counts only reflect what is reported by health authorities. They do not include most people who test themselves at home, or are infected without even knowing about it. Holidays and weekends also lead to lags in reported cases.</p> <p>If you could add all those numbers up — and you can’t — case counts would likely be substantially higher.</p> <p>For that reason, The Associated Press has recently told its editors and reporters to avoid emphasizing case counts in stories about the disease. That means, for example, no more stories focused solely on a particular country or state setting a one-day record for number of cases, because that claim has become unreliable.</p> <p>Throughout the media, there has been more caution in use of official case counts.</p> <p>An NBC News story on Monday about the skyrocketing number of COVID cases relied on a one-week average of case counts. A Tuesday story simply referred to a “tidal wave” of cases.</p> <p>During its coverage of a Senate hearing with health experts on Tuesday, the case counts CNN flashed onscreen were two-week averages. MSNBC used a variety of measurements, including a listing of the five states with highest reported numbers over the past three days.</p> <p>On its website’s “Guide to the Pandemic,” The Washington Post used a seven-day average of cases and compared that number to last Tuesday’s, showing a 56% increase. The New York Times used a daily count in an online chart, yet also included a two-week trend in both cases and deaths.</p> <p>An AP story Saturday by Jennifer Sinco Kelleher and Terry Tang headlined, “Omicron explosion spurs nationwide breakdown of services” was full of statistics from across the United States on hospitalization rates or employees calling out sick from work. The case count metric was not used.</p>

“We definitely wanted people to go a little deeper and be more specific in reporting,” said Josh Hoffner, the news editor who helps oversee AP’s virus coverage.

Many news organizations are debating how best to use statistics now during the omicron surge, Wu said. But there are no easy answers.

“It’s how journalism works,” Wu said. “We need the data. We need to show receipts to readers. But I try to do it carefully.”

Hospitalization and death rates are considered by some to be a more reliable picture of COVID-19’s current impact on society. Yet even the usefulness of those numbers has been called into question in recent days. In many cases, hospitalizations are incidental: there are people being admitted for other reasons and are surprised to find they test positive for COVID, said Tanya Lewis, senior editor for health and medicine at Scientific American.

Despite the imperfections, case counts should not be ignored, said Gary Schwitzer, a University of Minnesota School of Public Health instructor and publisher of HealthNewsReview.org, which monitors health coverage in the media.

The numbers illustrate trends, giving a picture of which areas of the country are being hit particularly hard or where the surge may have peaked, he said. They can predict broader societal impacts, like where hospitals are about to be slammed or where there will be worker shortages.

“These are stories that may not be told adequately if only hospitalizations and deaths are emphasized,” Schwitzer said.

That’s a point emphasized in AP’s internal guidance, as well.

“They do have value,” Hoffner said. “We don’t want people to eliminate mention of case counts.”

There are some in public health and journalism who believe the current surge — painful as it is — may augur good news. It could be a sign that COVID-19 is headed toward becoming an endemic disease that people learn to live with, rather than being a disruptive pandemic, wrote David Leonhardt and Ashley Wu in The New York Times.

But if the past two years have taught anything, it’s about the danger in predictions, Lewis said.

“We’ve been surprised time and again,” she said. “We don’t know everything about the course of the pandemic. We still need to be humble and keep an open mind in terms of where things are going.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Enforcing China zero-Covid policy
SOURCE	https://dnyuz.com/2022/01/12/the-army-of-millions-who-enforce-chinas-zero-covid-policy-at-all-costs/
GIST	<p>China’s “zero Covid” policy has a dedicated following: the millions of people who work diligently toward that goal, no matter the human costs.</p> <p>In northwestern city Xi’an, hospital employees refused to admit a man suffering from chest pains because he lived in a medium-risk district. He died of a heart attack.</p> <p>They informed a woman who was eight months pregnant and bleeding that her Covid test wasn’t valid. She lost her baby.</p> <p>Two community security guards told a young man they didn’t care that he had nothing to eat after catching him out during the lockdown. They beat him up.</p>

The Xi'an government was quick and resolute in imposing a strict lockdown in late December when cases were on the rise. But it was not prepared to provide food, medical care and other necessities to the city's 13 million residents, creating chaos and crises not seen since the country first locked down Wuhan in January 2020.

China's early success in containing the pandemic through iron-fist, authoritarian policies emboldened its officials, seemingly giving them license to act with conviction and righteousness. Many officials now believe that they must do everything within their power to ensure zero Covid infections since it is the will of their top leader, Xi Jinping.

For the officials, virus control comes first. The people's lives, well-being and dignity come much later.

The government has the help of a vast army of community workers who carry out the policy with zeal and hordes of online nationalists who attack anyone raising grievances or concerns. The tragedies in Xi'an have prompted some Chinese people to question how those enforcing the quarantine rules can behave like this and to ask who holds ultimate responsibility.

"It's very easy to blame the individuals who committed the banality of evil," a user called @IWillNotResistIt wrote on Weibo, the Chinese social media platform. "If you and I become the screws in this gigantic machine, we might not be able to resist its powerful pull either."

"The banality of evil" is a concept Chinese intellectuals often evoke in moments like Xi'an. It was coined by the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who wrote that Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief architects of the Holocaust, was an ordinary man who was motivated by "an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement."

Chinese intellectuals are struck by how many officials and civilians — often driven by professional ambition or obedience — are willing to be the enablers of authoritarian policies.

When the coronavirus emerged in Wuhan two years ago, it exposed the weaknesses in China's authoritarian system. Now, with patients dying of non-Covid diseases, residents going hungry and officials pointing fingers, the lockdown in Xi'an has shown how the country's political apparatus has ossified, bringing a ruthlessness to its single-minded pursuit of a zero-Covid policy.

Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, is in a much better position than Wuhan in early 2020, when thousands of people died of the virus, overwhelming the city's medical system. Xi'an has reported only three Covid-related deaths, the last one in March 2020. The city said 95 percent of its adults were vaccinated by July. In the latest wave, it had reported 2,017 confirmed cases by Monday and no deaths.

Still, it imposed a very harsh lockdown. Residents were not allowed to leave their compounds. Some buildings were locked up. More than 45,000 people were moved to quarantine facilities.

The city's health code system, which is used to track people and enforce quarantines, collapsed under heavy use. Deliveries largely disappeared. Some residents took to the internet to complain that they didn't have enough food.

But the lockdown rules were assiduously followed.

A few community volunteers made a young man who ventured out to buy food read a self-criticism letter in front of a video camera. "I only cared about whether I had food to eat," the young man read, according to a widely shared video. "I didn't take into account the serious consequences my behavior could bring to the community." The volunteers later apologized, according to The Beijing News, a state media outlet.

Three men were caught while escaping from Xi'an to the countryside, possibly to avoid the high costs of the lockdown. They hiked, biked and swam in wintry days and nights. Two of them were detained by the

police, according to local police and media reports. Together they were called the “Xi’an ironmen” on the Chinese internet.

Then there were the hospitals that denied patients access to medical care and deprived their loved ones the chance to say goodbye.

The man who suffered chest pain as he was dying of a heart attack waited six hours before a hospital finally admitted him. After his condition worsened, his daughter begged hospital employees to let her in and see him for the last time.

A male employee refused, according a video she posted on Weibo after her father’s death. “Don’t try to hijack me morally,” he said in the video. “I’m just carrying out my duty.”

A few low-level Xi’an officials were punished. The head of the city’s health commission apologized to the woman who suffered the miscarriage. The general manager of a hospital was suspended. Last Friday, the city announced that no medical facility could reject patients on the basis of Covid tests.

But that was about it. Even the state broadcaster, Central Television Station (CCTV), commented that some local officials were simply blaming their underlings. It seemed, the broadcaster wrote, only low-level cadres have been punished for these problems.

There are reasons people in the system showed little compassion and few spoke up online.

An emergency room doctor in eastern Anhui Province was sentenced to 15 months in prison for failing to follow pandemic control protocols by treating a patient with a fever last year, according to CCTV.

A deputy director-level official at a government agency in Beijing lost his position last week after some social media users reported that an article he wrote about the lockdown in Xi’an contained untruthful information.

In the article, he called the lockdown measures “inhumane” and “cruel.” It bore the headline, “The Sorrow of Xi’an Residents: Why They Ran Away from Xi’an at the Risk of Breaking the Law and Death.”

Since Wuhan, the Chinese internet has devolved into a parochial platform for nationalists to praise China, the government and the Communist Party. No dissent or criticism is tolerated, with online grievances attacked for providing ammunition for hostile foreign media.

Red, the social media platform, censored a post by the daughter of the man who died of heart attack because “it contained negative information about the society,” according to a screenshot on her account.

In Xi’an, there is no author like Fang Fang writing her Wuhan lockdown diary, no citizen journalists Chen Qiushi, Fang Bin or Zhang Zhan posting videos. The four of them have either been silenced, detained, disappeared or left dying in jail — sending a strong message to anyone who might dare to speak out about Xi’an.

The only widely circulated, in-depth article about the Xi’an lockdown was written by former journalist Zhang Wenmin, a Xi’an resident known by her pen name Jiang Xue. Her article has since been deleted and state security officers have warned her not to speak further on the matter, according to a person close to her. Some social media users called her garbage that should be taken out.

A few Chinese publications that had written excellent investigative articles out of Wuhan didn’t send reporters to Xi’an because they couldn’t secure passes to walk freely under lockdown, according to people familiar with the situation.

The Xi’an lockdown debacle hasn’t seemed to convince many people in China to abandon the country’s no-holds-barred approach to pandemic control.

	<p>A former athlete who is disabled and suffering from a series of illnesses cursed Fang Fang for her Wuhan diary in 2020. Last month, he posted on his Weibo account that he couldn't buy medicine because his compound in Xi'an was locked down. His problems were solved, and now he uses the hashtag #everyoneinpositiveenergy and retweets posts that attack Ms. Zhang, the former journalist.</p> <p>Despite announcing the city's battle with the virus as a victory last week, the government isn't relenting on much of the rules, and is setting a very high bar for ending the lockdown. The party secretary of Shaanxi told Xi'an officials on Monday that their future pandemic control efforts should remain "strict."</p> <p>"A needle size loophole can funnel high wind," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Army: guerilla war exercise North Carolina
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/guerrilla-war-exercise-to-be-fought-across-rural-north-carolina-counties-army-warns/ar-AASDjEy
GIST	<p>CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A "realistic" guerrilla war will be fought across two dozen North Carolina counties in the coming weeks, with young soldiers battling seasoned "freedom fighters," according to the U.S. Army.</p> <p>The two-week "unconventional warfare exercise" will be staged Jan. 22-Feb. 4 on privately owned land. And it will be realistic enough to include the sounds of gunfire (blanks) and flares, the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School said in a news release.</p> <p>Exact times, locations and exercise specifics were not provided.</p> <p>However, advance publicity is intended to make sure civilians — including law enforcement officers — don't mistake the fighting for terrorism or criminal activity, which has happened in the past.</p> <p>"Residents may hear blank gunfire and see occasional flares. Controls are in place to ensure there is no risk to persons or property," the warfare center said.</p> <p>"Residents with concerns should contact local law enforcement officials, who will immediately contact exercise control officials. ... For the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, safety is always the command's top priority during all training events."</p> <p>Called Robin Sage, the exercise serves as a final test for Special Forces Qualification Course training and it places candidates in a politically unstable country known as Pineland.</p> <p>The candidates face off against seasoned service members from units across Fort Bragg, as well as specially trained civilians, officials said. The setting is "characterized by armed conflict," forcing the students to solve problems in a real world setting, the center says.</p> <p>"These military members act as realistic opposing forces and guerrilla freedom fighters, also known as Pineland resistance movement," the center said.</p> <p>"To add realism of the exercise, civilian volunteers throughout the state act as role players. Participation by these volunteers is crucial to the success of this training, and past trainees attest to the realism they add to the exercise.</p> <p>Advance public notice of "the U.S. military's premiere unconventional warfare exercise" became a priority in 2002, after one soldier was killed and another wounded when a Moore County sheriff's deputy mistook Robin Sage exercises for criminal activity.</p>

	<p>Pineland covers counties primarily in southeastern North Carolina, as well as Chesterfield, Dillon and Marlboro counties in South Carolina. The full list in North Carolina: “Alamance, Anson, Bladen, Brunswick, Cabarrus, Chatham, Columbus, Cumberland, Davidson, Guilford, Harnett, Hoke, Lee, Montgomery, Moore, New Hanover, Randolph, Richmond, Robeson, Rowan, Sampson, Scotland, Stanly, Union, and Wake.”</p> <p>“All Robin Sage movements and events have been coordinated with public safety officials throughout and within the towns and counties hosting the training,” officials said.</p> <p>Among the safety protocols implemented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — “Formal written notification to the chiefs of law enforcement agencies in the affected counties, with a follow-up visit from a unit representative. — All civilian and non-student military participants are briefed on procedures to follow if there is contact with law enforcement officials. — Students will only wear civilian clothes if the situation warrants, as determined by the instructors, and will wear a distinctive brown armband during these instances. — Training areas and vehicles used during exercises are clearly labeled.”
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HEADLINE	01/11 Uncovering undocumented ruse by SPD
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/independent-journalist-reflects-on-uncovering-undocumented-ruse-by-seattle-police/281-809301dd-5a74-4c77-812f-c27c0fbfbab9
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Omari Salisbury was in the middle of it all during the summer of 2020.</p> <p>"We were live streaming the whole time," he said about those long days and nights near Cal Anderson Park and the handful of blocks that were known as the CHAZ or CHOP.</p> <p>He remembers the oddity of June 8, 2020 in particular, and how the crowd seemed to get agitated over a rumor near the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct.</p> <p>"Did it change the posture of the people that were there? Yeah 100 percent," he said about the word on the street that a group of Proud Boys were marching to the area to take on protestors.</p> <p>It was a moment, amidst the daily updates, the owner of Converge Media said got lost until months later. He started reviewing old footage and said there was a comment from one of the people in the protest zone about grabbing guns to take on the group.</p> <p>It's what made him question what was reality, and what was not.</p> <p>He asked for records and searched for radio transmissions. Nothing. He finally found some police dispatches, and forwarded them to the Office of Police Accountability (OPA), who he said got back to him.</p> <p>"They were perplexed," he said on Tuesday.</p> <p>That's because there was no evidence, accounting, or documentation that a group of Proud Boys ever marched on Capitol Hill. No body cam or surveillance video.</p> <p>Late last week, OPA reported that it was all a ruse by Seattle police. Legal in definition, the two-way radio traffic was approved by command staff to serve as a distraction during a chaotic time. Yet, OPA did not recommend discipline, despite the fact the office warned there could have been severe consequences by the actions.</p> <p>"I think we need ruses documented," said Seattle Councilmember Lisa Herbold on Tuesday, before leading a review of the tactics in a committee meeting.</p>

	<p>OPA Director Andrew Myerberg, who led the investigation, credited Salisbury for bringing it to the city's attention, and that, "This was a really poor decision from everyone involved," adding, "It was a bad idea."</p> <p>New Deputy Mayor Monisha Harrell added, "that cannot be how we operate," and that "it does bother me that there was no documentation."</p> <p>It was unclear whether Herbold or any others would pitch legislation to amend the legality of the technique.</p> <p>Seattle police didn't immediately respond to questions about the hearing.</p> <p>Interim Chief Adrian Diaz is scheduled to appear next to Mayor Bruce Harrell on Wednesday to address the issue.</p> <p>Salisbury said he'll continue to ask questions about that period in Seattle's history.</p> <p>"You don't even hear any kind of remorse," he said. "You tarnished the name and the credibility of your organization. Where are the people who are coming out and saying that? The damage that might have been done now to the credibility of to our organization, was it worth this?"</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Surge spreads an epidemic of confusion
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/covid-confusion-test-vaccine-mask/2022/01/10/1b2a9788-6e48-11ec-b9fc-b394d592a7a6_story.html
GIST	<p>Tiffany Li wants to trust the government's guidance on the coronavirus, but the messages are so confusing now that she's enhanced her precautions, going back to seeing friends only outdoors — in New Hampshire, in January — often with masks on.</p> <p>In Houston, Mark Thiessen was all in on vaccinations last year, but now, with all the conflicting information about when and whether to get tested, he completely avoids pandemic news. When three members of his family got what felt like head colds over Christmas break, they didn't bother to get tested or quarantine.</p> <p>As Americans push into a third winter of viral discontent, this season has delivered something different: Amid the deep polarization about masks and vaccines, amid the discord over whether and how to return to pre-pandemic life, a strange unity of confusion is emerging, a common inability to decipher conflicting advice and clashing guidelines coming from government, science, health, media and other institutions.</p> <p>On seemingly every front in the battle against the coronavirus, the messages are muddled: Test or don't test? Which test? When? Isolate or not? For five days? Ten? Go to school or not? See friends and resume normal life, or hunker down again — and if so, for how long, to what end?</p> <p>The swift and supremely efficient spread of the omicron variant — 7 million cases in the past month, though deaths have declined compared with previous surges — has unleashed waves of new rules and decisions governing every aspect of life. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidance shifts from week to week, with changing recommendations on how long people infected with the virus should isolate and who needs to be tested after symptoms resolve. A half-dozen of President Biden's former health advisers recently called on him to pivot to a "new normal" strategy of living with the coronavirus indefinitely.</p> <p>Meanwhile, schools and colleges open, close, go online, reverse themselves. In liberal and conservative media alike, countervailing voices alternately raise and dash hopes that the pandemic endgame is nigh. The National Football League scrambled to put third-tier players on the field to keep huge crowds coming</p>

into stadiums, while the National Hockey League canceled a slew of games and the Grammys were indefinitely postponed.

“I feel like I’m swimming in the ocean at night, and I could be 100 yards from the shore or 100 miles, and all I can do is keep swimming,” said Chip Franklin, who runs an Internet talk show with a liberal bent. “I’m 65 and I don’t think I’m going to get this and die, but we don’t go to restaurants, and I don’t see anybody except the same eight people we saw at the beginning, in 2020. Anybody that says they know what to do now is a liar.”

Franklin heaped blame on Donald Trump’s handling of the first year of the pandemic, but now, he said, “I look at the lack of tests and the confusing messages, and people on my side — for mandates and vaccination — are hesitant to criticize Biden for fear of empowering Trump, but it’s a mess.”

The muddle comes six months after Biden declared a “summer of freedom” in which Americans could gather for cookouts as the coronavirus seemed to recede enough to allow a resumption of normal life. But then the delta variant of the virus hit hard, hospitalizations and deaths shot up, and the bracingly contagious omicron variant followed, with apparently a much milder impact on vaccinated people — but 500 percent higher case numbers. The result has been a severe case of emotional whiplash accompanied by sharp pivots in policy.

When Li, a law professor at the University of New Hampshire, [summarized her confusion in a tweet](#) last week — “Stay indoors. But also return in person. Wear a mask. Not that one. The expensive one, that you can’t find. Take rapid tests. Which you also can’t find. But if you find them, don’t buy them. Rapid tests don’t work” — she racked up nearly 300,000 likes.

“I would love to be able to say, ‘Here are five sources you can rely on,’ but the information is constantly shifting,” she said in an interview. “The CDC and FDA and public health departments are still worthy of trust, but they have to continually change their guidance based on the science. There’s a lot of conflicting information out there, and we’re all just tired of it.”

The lack of clear guidance also feeds tensions at her school, as at many others, Li said, as faculty members, students and administrators weigh their discomfort with being around other people against the need to return to in-person education.

Last February, when Thiessen, a trial lawyer in Houston, and his wife, Taly, fell ill with covid-19, they quarantined for 10 days after their tests came back positive. But last month, after Thiessen’s stepmother and father, who are in their 70s, came down with covid, Thiessen, his wife and their children, ages 7 and 9, forewent testing.

“We knew we probably had it, but we didn’t even think about getting tested,” the lawyer said. “It’s just such a hassle to get tested and find a test. We’re fed up with it all. At this point, we just need to start living with covid. Everybody should get it and move on.”

He said he had simply hit overload. “I was getting PTSD from not only covid news but all the politics too,” Thiessen said.

Before the delta and omicron variants arrived, Americans’ optimism about the course of the pandemic was on the rise, but in recent months, it has plummeted, according to a Gallup tracking poll, which found that the portion of the country that believes the situation is getting better dropped from 89 percent in June to 51 percent in October and then to 31 percent in December.

Along with pessimism, mistrust is also spreading, said Amy Cirbus, a therapist who treats patients from around the country by video. Whether the chaotic messaging about how to behave in the face of omicron leads people to rein in their behavior or to push ahead with life as it once was, she sees patients in both red and blue America turning away from voices of authority.

“There is some unity now: We’re all in this confusion together,” said Cirbus, who lives in New York’s Hudson Valley and is the director of clinical content for Talkspace, an online therapy platform. “It really seems now that everyone is saying some form of ‘I need to live my life.’ ”

Patients tell Cirbus that they feel blown in every which direction: “I want to go see a movie — here’s that protocol; my kids have to go to school — here’s that protocol; I have to go to work — yet another set of rules,” she said. “It’s a lot of information, and it doesn’t all agree. It all adds to a deep feeling of mistrust. It adds to the overwhelm: ‘What do I do?’ Relationships are thinned, people are quick to anger. Patients say they are just holding on.”

That fraying of the public temper was on the mind of CDC Director Rochelle Walensky recently when she said on CNN that although the agency’s decision to slice the recommended quarantine period from 10 days to five days was based on scientific findings, it also “really had a lot to do with what we thought people would be able to tolerate. . . . Less than a third of people are isolating when they need to. And so we really want to make sure that we had guidance . . . that people were willing to adhere to.”

Christine Parizo, a marketing writer in League City, Tex., southeast of Houston, lost patience with pandemic messaging from politicians, health officials and the news media long ago. In March 2020, she stayed home and limited her contact with people outside her household. But the mother of 10- and 15-year-olds never got vaccinated and joined with other parents opposed to mask mandates at her kids’ schools.

Now, with hundreds of thousands of Americans being infected every day, she’s decided that “with omicron, we’re seeing the end of the pandemic. We’re all going to be fine. That’s the bottom line.”

Parizo, 43, said she has no faith in local health officials or Anthony S. Fauci, Biden’s chief medical adviser. For information on the pandemic, she turns to the Daily Mail and looks at medical research papers.

Just before Christmas, she attended Trump’s appearance at Houston’s Toyota Center with former Fox News host Bill O’Reilly and felt no concern about catching the virus in a crowded arena.

“It’s no way to live to miss out on things,” she said. “It’s no way to live, to live in fear.”

But she did not join audience members who booed Trump and O’Reilly when they talked about both being vaccinated and boosted.

“That was silly,” she said. “Both Trump and O’Reilly, they’re not young. They have every reason to be vaxxed and boosted.”

Still, she sees no reason to join them. “The circle I hang out with, we don’t wear masks and the majority of us haven’t gotten the vaccine,” Parizo said. “We just want it to be over.”

Andrea Dvorachek, 46, a former nurse in west Houston, also wants it to be over, but the messaging about omicron has nudged her in the opposite direction. She and her husband eat out only outdoors now. Her teenagers’ Catholic school reinstituted its mask mandate last month after having done away with it earlier in the fall.

A Democrat who voted for Biden, Dvorachek and her family are vaccinated and appreciated being required to show a vaccination card or negative test result before attending a Houston Rockets National Basketball Association game last week.

But she wonders: “Is that good [enough] anymore, though? I don’t know.” She trusts the epidemiologists she follows on social media, but the overall message she gets seems murky.

“I try to look at the science of it since it’s become so heavily politicized, which really makes me sad,” she said.

When her husband tested positive for the coronavirus last month, the family rescheduled a trip to Universal Studios in Orlando and instead spent the holidays at home. “We’re not going to stay home and be scared, but we’re going to be smart,” she said. “With omicron, I think it’s going to be a real confusing month ahead.”

Families often have to make important decisions quickly, without time to study all the guidelines. Alisa Glassman’s coronavirus test turned up positive just before Christmas, but her husband and 9-year-old son’s results were negative. They needed to decide: Should Mom isolate herself, or should the family risk infection to stay together?

The guidance from government and health officials pointed toward isolation, and at first, they did “what nearly two years of paranoia and preparedness taught us,” said Glassman, who lives in Takoma Park and is the lead organizer for Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, a nonprofit community group. They separated and continued their conversation by phone. But by the next day, they had flipped: They would stay home but be together.

Glassman said the pandemic has taught her that “I am a social being who needs to be around people, preferably closer than six feet away. Our mental health was fraying, and the risks of asymptomatic or even mild covid were far outweighed by the specter of not being able to be together over the winter break.”

Contradictions appear at every turn — between federal quarantine guidelines and those of local school systems, even between like-minded friends who make different calculations about when and where their kids should be masked — and each family has to make its own way.

“We have to find a balance,” said Trevett Hooper, who owns Butterjoint, a foodie destination near the University of Pittsburgh. “We have to consider what it means for people to be cooped up — what it does to their mental health, for depression, for a lot of problems. We have to find a sensible middle ground.”

Hooper, 46, has at various points during the pandemic shut down his eatery, opened to sell grocery items, opened for takeout only, opened entirely and now closed his doors once again because he and several staffers caught the virus.

Assessing risk while trying not to be overwhelmed by crosscurrents of information has become a key part of Hooper’s work. He used to read the New York Times, the New Yorker and the Atlantic, but he’s gone cold turkey on all of those. Nor does he watch the local TV news or check local health department sites.

“I just stopped it all for my mental health,” he said. “In my stage of life, I need to focus on my kids and on my business.”

Hooper still scans the Web for news and keeps tabs on what other restaurants are doing. He’s found the CDC guidelines helpful but said he has “gone beyond that. As a business owner, I feel like you just kind of make it up as you go along, and you do the best you can.”

What he finds frustrating is the lack of a clear middle path, a course people can follow somewhere between “people fighting mad who don’t want to do anything [and] people who are trying to follow the rules 110 percent to make sure that nothing ever happens” to them.

“Covid tells us something about America now,” Hooper said. “It’s just so clear how we’re at war with each other. I worry about how people are getting their information. . . . I think we have to be smart about this, but it doesn’t mean going back to March 2020.”

The long slog of the pandemic — now in its 23rd month — has left Jeffrey Hile almost numb. A contractor and engineer who lives in Wexford, north of Pittsburgh, Hile is an avid Trump supporter who

	<p>drove three hours to get vaccinated as soon as it was possible. He got boosted, avoids restaurants and wears a mask when out in public.</p> <p>“I have hand sanitizer everywhere,” he said. “It’s a wonder I have skin left.”</p> <p>But despite needing to protect his 84-year-old mother, who resides in an assisted-living facility, Hile steers clear of news about the virus and directives from the government.</p> <p>“I don’t think they know what is really is going on,” he said. Although he’s trained as an engineer, Hile, 59, said he doesn’t wade into scientific reports on covid or debates over whether the pandemic is waning. Instead, he relies mostly on advice from his girlfriend’s brother, an eye doctor “who reads everything.”</p> <p>“To me, it’s all sort of a crapshoot,” he said. “I think people are just fed up. . . . They got tired of it, and they are just going to do what they want. I am so busy with my mother that I don’t think about it. If you don’t have much going on in your life, though, you think about covid. And if you are thinking about it all the time, you will go nuts.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 FDA warns: most people going to get Covid
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/11/most-people-are-going-get-covid-momentous-warning-senate-hearing/
GIST	<p>One of the most indelible — and ultimately telling — moments of the early coronavirus pandemic came in late February 2020. A top official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that the spread of the virus was “inevitable.”</p> <p>“It’s not a question of <i>if</i> this will happen, but <i>when</i> this will happen, and how many people in this country will have severe illnesses,” Nancy Messonnier said. The comment caused a blowup at the White House and among top administration officials, who had to account for President Donald Trump’s consistent desire to downplay the threat during his reelection campaign. Then-Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar would later acknowledge that Messonnier had been “right.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, nearly two years later, came another such plainly stated and significant warning of what lies ahead in the pandemic: for most people, an infection.</p> <p>“I think it’s hard to process what’s actually happening right now,” said Janet Woodcock, acting commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, “which is most people are going to get covid.”</p> <p>Woodcock pitched this as being a necessary acknowledgment when it comes to charting the path forward — recognizing that the focus now needs to be on averting the worst that widespread infections could bring in the near term.</p> <p>“What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function, transportation, you know, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens,” she said. “I think after that will be a good time to reassess how we’re approaching this pandemic.”</p> <p>Woodcock’s projection might not be terribly surprising, given the number of daily positive tests rising to record levels. On Monday, the seven-day average reached more than 760,000, meaning about 1 in every 60 Americans has tested positive in the last week alone. (And that’s probably a significant undercount, given the mildness of many omicron cases and the availability of at-home tests.) A study released about four months ago — before the rise of the unprecedentedly infectious omicron variant — estimated that 31 percent of the U.S. population had already been infected even by that point.</p> <p>Woodcock’s comment also came shortly after a World Health Organization official warned the same day that Europe could see more than 50 percent of its population infected over the next six to eight weeks.</p>

But as with Messonnier's comment, the acknowledgment is a momentous one in the fight against the virus. There has been some hope that omicron could spike and fade relatively quickly — as it [appears to have in South Africa](#). But Sen. Richard Burr (N.C.), the ranking Republican on the Senate Health Committee, which hosted Woodcock and other health officials, noted Israeli scientists were less bullish that their country would be following the same trajectory.

In responding to Burr's comments about South Africa, Anthony S. Fauci added another reality check, warning of inevitable future variants and that omicron infections might not provide natural immunity against them.

"If we wind up getting infected with omicron at a very, very low level of pathogenicity, is that going to be sort of almost like a live attenuated vaccine? I don't think we can say that right now," Fauci said.

Fauci added: "We really have to see how things spread out, when we see how that fares in the next variant. So there will be invariably another variant; we're going to have to take a look at whether or not there's going to be any protection there."

Even as they warned about the peril that lay ahead and the likelihood of infection for many Americans, Woodcock, Fauci and the others were careful to emphasize the importance of preventing infections as much as possible, given the strain widespread infection could put on hospitals and essential services.

Woodcock also repeatedly seemed to argue for a new footing in the fight against the virus: one that acknowledges what lies ahead in the near term and deals with institutional changes later on.

Sen. Mike Braun (R-Ind.) later in the hearing cited [a Washington Post editorial](#) arguing for a change in approach to the pandemic from the administration. Braun compared the situation to a business at which high-ranking officials might be fired and things would be decentralized.

"I think that we're talking about a natural disaster, and you can fire your board of directors because your factory was devastated by a hurricane, a tornado or a wildfire," Woodcock said. "But I don't know whether that would improve this situation."

Woodcock added: "I think right now we need to focus on continuity of operations for hospitals and other essential services as this variant sweeps through the population. I don't think that will last a really long time, but that's where I think we are right now."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Federal agencies: unvax weekly testing rule
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/11/biden-federal-coronavirus-mandate-testing-rules-unvaccinated/
GIST	<p>Federal agencies must start testing unvaccinated employees at least weekly for the coronavirus by Feb. 15, the Biden administration said in new guidance issued Tuesday.</p> <p>The testing, which mainly affects those exempted from President Biden's vaccination mandate for federal workers, would be required during any week in which those employees "work onsite or interact in person with members of the public as part of their job duties," the guidance says.</p> <p>Agencies are also free to require more frequent testing for certain occupations or work settings, the administration says.</p> <p>More than 90 percent of 3.5 million federal employees and uniformed armed forces personnel have complied with Biden's executive order issued in September requiring coronavirus vaccines, but Tuesday's guidance offers more clear rules for those who have applied for or received exemptions.</p>

Employees who do not comply with the mandate generally are first to be counseled, then suspended without pay and then, potentially, fired unless they get the vaccines. Those who have been granted an exemption on medical or religious grounds, or whose application for an exemption is still under consideration, will be subject to regular testing and other restrictions when working in person.

After initially setting a vaccination deadline of Nov. 22 and [telling agencies](#) they could start the disciplinary process even earlier, the administration later instructed agencies [to wait](#) until this month to start taking any action more serious than counseling for holdouts.

The most recent [data](#) on vaccination rates show that as of early December, 92 percent of federal employees and military personnel had received at least one dose and another 4.7 percent had asked for an exemption on religious or medical grounds.

There has been no accounting yet of how many exemption requests have been granted.

Tuesday's guidance fleshes out previously announced requirements that unvaccinated employees be tested at least weekly when working on-site, adding that agencies may require testing more often "for certain roles, functions, or work environments." Agencies further may require testing of employees "regardless of their vaccination status" for those reasons.

The guidance also says that agencies may use any of the tests approved by the Food and Drug Administration and that testing can be done on-site, at locations such as pharmacies, or can be self-administered — in each case, at the agency's cost. However, agencies would have to verify a self-reported negative result, and tests "should not be both self-administered and self-read by the employee unless observed by the agency or an authorized telehealth provider," the guidance says.

Employees subject to regular testing who refuse to take a required test can be barred from the workplace and put on temporary paid leave, and the agency "may pursue disciplinary action up to and including removal," the guidance adds.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Four reasons empty grocery store shelves
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/11/grocery-store-empty-shelves-again/
GIST	<p>It's barely 2022 and already social media is swamped with pictures of empty grocery shelves — from cream cheese to paper towels, children's juice boxes and cat food.</p> <p>Some of the culprits for this round of shortfalls are the same as in the early days of the pandemic, and some can be chalked up to new problems bumping up against old ones.</p> <p>Here are some of the reasons an array of your favorite items may be out of stock at grocery stores.</p> <p>Omicron's surge</p> <p>The omicron variant surge has meant more work for stores — more deep cleaning, a return to masking and social distancing — just as more employees can't work and are calling out due to illness or quarantine.</p> <p>In a Monday call with 27 food industry chief executives, Geoff Freeman, CEO of the industry organization Consumer Brands Association, said more employee absences were reported in the past two weeks than in all of 2020.</p> <p>"That's remarkable," he said. "Throw on top of that being down 80,000 truck drivers nationally, and another 10 percent of workers being absent at food manufacturing facilities, and you're putting a lot of pressure on the system all at one time."</p> <p>Covid has swept through supermarket chain Stew Leonard's, which has stores in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. Some 200 of its 2,500 employees are out sick or in quarantine, said owner Stew Leonard Jr.</p>

“It puts a challenge, for example, on making every kind of pizza you want: The pineapple and ham pizza, we’ve decided not to make,” Leonard said. “And most manufacturers out here have done the same thing. Everyone is hit with a shortage of labor. Some because of the Great Resignation, but a lot of it is the omicron surge.”

Access to rapid [coronavirus](#) tests is also making it challenging to get employees back to work swiftly, he added.

“Two weeks ago, our No. 1 selling item at Stew Leonard’s was filet mignon. Right now, the No. 1 seller is the rapid tests. We have a warehouse in New Jersey where we pick them up. We sent a tractor trailer and asked them to load them up. They said, ‘Not so fast. How much do you want to pay for them?’ It was a bidding war right there on the loading dock.”

The National Grocers Association has requested its grocers be prioritized for testing supplies from federal and state governments, and they’ve also asked for flexibility with new federal vaccination and testing mandates with the aim of minimizing further workforce disruptions, said Jim Dudlicek, the trade group’s communications director. With the prevalence of the omicron variant, even among vaccinated workers, many grocery chains are operating stores with less than half of their normal workforce, which makes it harder to stock and display grocery items or to prepare foods made on-site.

“While there is plenty of food in the supply chain, we anticipate consumers will continue to experience sporadic disruptions in certain product categories as we have seen over the past year and a half due to the ongoing supply and labor challenges,” Dudlicek said.

Winter weather

Winter storms dumped more than a foot of snow across parts of the Mid-Atlantic just after the New Year, and sweeping weather systems have made road conditions difficult in many parts of the country in the past two weeks.

For example, [the 20-plus-hour traffic jam](#) last week on Interstate 95 near Stafford, Va., paralyzed a fair number of grocery delivery semi trucks.

“The winter months are always challenging,” said Doug Baker, vice president of industry relations for FMI, a food industry organization. “But we’ve seen weather patterns that we’re not used to in terms of frequency and magnitude, from the West Coast to the East Coast.”

In addition to weather delaying the delivery to grocery stores around the country, Baker said bad weather also influences consumer psychology, which played into some items getting sold out.

“There are certain products people ritually buy when there is an impending weather event,” Baker said. “And then when people see images of stores low on stock, it’s not out of the ordinary for people to buy two of something instead of one, just in case.”

And with more than 5,000 [schools delaying](#) their reopening this month due to the omicron surge and storms, families are feeling a greater urgency to lay in supplies of bread, milk, meat and cereal to make up for meals not eaten at school.

Supply chain snarls

Supply chain problems are no longer just about shipping containers sitting in ports or out at sea, waiting to be unloaded. They are also about the slowing of the production of goods that the United States imports.

In China and the United Kingdom, some municipalities have once again shut down factories and thus slowed orders for certain ingredients and food products for U.S. imports.

“A lot of our ingredients and products come from countries that have had their own spikes,” Baker said. “Some countries have taken a very strict approach and shut down manufacturing, so that slows the whole process down. It’s not just a domestic issue, it’s about how other countries are dealing with omicron.”

Still, at the nation’s busiest port, the Port of Los Angeles, cargo volume fell sharply in November compared with a year earlier, [according to the port’s own figures](#).

Fruits and vegetables have seen fewer instances of shortfalls and supply problems than other food categories, but currently there are some empty shelves that are more about food safety. The Food and Drug Administration last week issued a voluntary recall on certain [bagged salads](#) and [other vegetables](#) due to possible listeria contamination. In general, though, there have been fewer food recalls during the pandemic.

More people eating at home

A combination of factors from rising inflation to surging omicron cases are prompting households to eat at home more — meaning grocery stores are being inundated with shoppers once again.

Grocery sales climbed more than 8 percent in December, according to national retail sales tracker Mastercard SpendingPulse. Stores are still restocking from that surge and have been struggling to keep shelves fully stocked in several categories since the beginning of this year, [according to](#) data firm IRI’s consumer packaged goods supply index.

“We’re seeing a lot of restocking and replenishment going on,” said Jessica Dankert, vice president of supply chain for the Retail Leaders Industry Association. The heavy shopping season has come at a particularly difficult time, coming out of the holiday period, when families traditionally cook more at home anyway.

Widespread storms and the increased hesitancy around dining out because of the omicron surge have contributed to more demand at grocers.

Also, in some cities, [restaurants and other food service establishments had to close temporarily](#) due to coronavirus outbreaks among workers, which sent even more families to dine at home in December.

“You’ll see that replenishment build back up,” Dankert predicted, “but we’ll see these disruptions for months to come.” Inflation has also been influencing consumer behavior, driving them to eat more at home and travel and eat out less.

Grocery prices rose 6.4 percent over the past 12 months ending in December, the largest increase since 2008, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics index of prices. And for subcategories such as beef, prices rose a staggering 20.9 percent.

Datassential’s [analysts say](#) consumers turn away from restaurants and back to home dining when food prices surge. Restaurant-going becomes more of a splurge. Couple that with consumer hesitancy due to omicron, and consumers are swinging back to eating more grocery store food.

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HEADLINE	01/11 India capital: surge, hospital staff shortages
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/india-covid-doctors-shortage/
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI — As the omicron variant blazed through the Indian capital this week, Naresh Gautam’s intensive care ward, inside one of India’s largest public hospitals, went from half empty Monday afternoon to almost full by Tuesday morning.</p> <p>But the steady stream of new patients in his ward did not worry Gautam as much as who was missing: nearly half of his colleagues, who had tested positive for the coronavirus.</p>

Eight months after a delta surge ravaged India, a shortage of medical staff is posing a looming problem as authorities seek to avoid a repeat of last spring, when the health-care system buckled, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. While health-care workers and government officials say they have learned lessons and have prepared far more hospital beds and oxygen tanks ahead of the current wave, hospitals are facing a pinch in personnel as authorities in several cities begin a soft lockdown to slow transmission rates.

On Tuesday, New Delhi ordered private-sector offices and restaurants to close as India reported nearly 170,000 new cases. Other cities, including the financial hub Mumbai, are enforcing curfews and also keeping schools closed.

At Safdarjung Hospital in the heart of Delhi, Gautam said front-line workers treating covid-19 are having to work shifts of up to 16 hours as their colleagues test positive or stay at home with the onset of symptoms. Gautam's hospital is converting more ICUs dedicated to covid patients — and possibly even its 100-bed overflow facility built last year on campus, though he doesn't expect a shortage of beds.

"A lack of doctors, that's what's causing a real crisis," said Gautam, an anesthesiologist.

While many countries, including the United States, have reported staffing difficulties, India's problem has been exacerbated by a dispute between trainee doctors and the government, which has delayed roughly 45,000 recent medical graduates from joining the workforce.

The incoming batch of residents will register for placement at hospitals this week, government officials said Sunday after a Supreme Court ruling settled a conflict over quotas. But hospitals across India won't receive their incoming residents until mid-February, said Anuj Aggarwal, a Delhi-based radiologist who serves as secretary of a national union representing medical residents.

"It's better than never, but it's already too late," said Aggarwal, who estimated that about a third of residents at Delhi hospitals are home sick.

In a memo Monday, Rajesh Bhushan, the Indian health secretary, ordered hospitals to "conserve" their staffs and summon retired health-care workers and students to assist in phone consultations. Many hospitals have already cut elective procedures to funnel staff to covid wards, according to media reports. This week, India began administering vaccine boosters to health-care workers and people over age 60 with comorbidities.

Despite omicron's rapid spread, Indian officials say they are not worried yet about hospitals overflowing. While some of the country's top urban hospitals are seeing a spike of patients, many are not: Officials in Delhi and Mumbai are touting an abundance of empty beds this week. Other jurisdictions have reported that they have makeshift clinics ready to be opened in case demand soars.

A team of Indian modeling experts at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur, which advises the government, has projected that cases will continue to grow and peak at the end of January — and exceed the record numbers set in India during the second wave.

K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, said the government should have paused all political, social and religious events until April. Omicron, like a "fast-racing car," was likely to spread from major cities to small towns and the countryside, he said.

"I'm concerned that as a society we aren't taking note and protecting ourselves with appropriate behavior," Reddy said. "We're giving an opportunity to the virus to spread very fast."

According to India's genome-sequencing body, data from December showed that the delta variant of the coronavirus was responsible for 39 percent of infections. Now, many experts believe the current wave is being powered by the omicron variant, even if delta remains in play.

The rapid rate of cases doubling and the phenomenon of the virus infecting vaccinated people or those who had covid in the past suggest omicron is now the dominant variant in India, said Shashank Joshi, a member of the coronavirus task force for Maharashtra state, which includes Mumbai.

Joshi said the country was “not past” the point at which the situation was worrying, but he remained “cautiously optimistic” that omicron will not send an overwhelming flood of patients to hospitals in the coming weeks. The government’s preparedness plan should have a clear communication strategy, a home isolation policy so that hospitals and workers are not too stretched, and measures to focus treatment on high-risk, vulnerable patients, he said.

Still, one major reason for concern has been data showing a high proportion of tests returning positive in major cities, including Kolkata, where the rate is nearly 40 percent. That suggests infections are more prevalent than what test results show and could still rise sharply, experts warn.

The positivity rate in the next 10 days will be a key signal to “how the infrastructure will take the pressure,” said Shiv Kumar Sarin, the vice chancellor of Delhi’s Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences.

Many hospitals have already begun to enact contingency plans. At the All India Institute of Medical Science in Delhi, Savrankar Datta, a radiologist, said the institute’s directors announced a plan two weeks ago to quickly vacate beds as cases rose. The hospital in recent days converted two buildings, the trauma and burn centers, to exclusively house covid patients as they began to stream in. Many departments, he added, have halted elective procedures and funneled staff to treat covid because doctors were falling ill, and it was not possible to continue normal operations.

“It’s wrong to say this is not going to be a challenge for the health-care system,” he said. “The sheer numbers will be so high that even a small percentage of hospitalizations is going to test limits.”

But at the very least, he said, “we’re not going to allow bed shortages to occur.”

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HEADLINE	01/11 D.C. reinstates public health emergency
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vb/2022/01/11/bowser-public-health-emergency-hospitals/
GIST	<p>D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) on Tuesday imposed a public health emergency in the District until late January, an action that allows hospitals to address staffing needs and other concerns as hospitalizations rise throughout the region.</p> <p>The D.C. Hospital Association wrote Bowser’s administration last week to encourage officials to declare the emergency, which the association said would provide hospitals with the flexibility to change how treatment resources are distributed among patients by allowing them to utilize “crisis standards of care,” while granting them more options to bolster staff.</p> <p>City health officials and the hospital association have said in recent weeks that emergency rooms have been particularly stressed by residents showing up with mild symptoms or seeking coronavirus tests. The governors of Maryland and Virginia declared 30-day states of emergency this month, aimed at easing the burden on overwhelmed hospitals.</p> <p>At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, Bowser had declared both a public emergency and a public health emergency, moves that granted her the ability to order mandatory medical quarantines and request federal disaster relief funds, among other measures. In July, as new cases waned, Bowser ended the public health emergency but extended the public emergency — which meant she could still establish mask and vaccination requirements, and alter government services in response to the pandemic.</p> <p>In the mayoral order Tuesday, Bowser said over-encumbered emergency rooms spurred her to reinstate the public health emergency until Jan. 26 in a limited capacity. The order says it pertains specifically to hospitals, medical facilities and personnel, including mortuary services — and provides “the authority</p>

	<p>necessary to modify administrative procedures, deadlines and standards” to quickly address the needs of hospitals.</p> <p>“The physical capacity of hospitals remains strong, but emergency rooms are overwhelmed with persons suffering from covid-19 and persons who fear having covid-19, causing long delays both for them and other patients,” the order reads. “Further hospitals cannot use all their bed capacity due to staff shortages.” The order notes that some hospitals are facing 25 percent reductions in staff due to coronavirus-related leave.</p> <p>The seven-day averages of coronavirus hospitalizations in Maryland and Virginia on Tuesday were 3,543 and 3,567, respectively — record highs during the pandemic, according to Washington Post data. The seven-day average for hospitalizations was 888 in D.C. on Monday, also a record, though District health officials have expressed they are less concerned about capacity and more worried about staffing shortages affecting facilities.</p> <p>In its letter, the D. C. Hospital Association asked for flexibilities including a hastened process to consider licensure applications and hire graduate professionals, and for health-care practitioners in some cases to be allowed to engage in activities not authorized by their license under supervision if “doing so is necessary to allow the health care facility to meet required staffing ratios or otherwise ensure the continued and safe delivery of health care services.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Omicron contagious before testing positive
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/omicron-can-make-you-contagious-before-you-test-positive-allowing-for-rapid-spread/
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES — Ahead of Christmas, health experts suggested undergoing a rapid coronavirus test just before any gatherings.</p> <p>But some health experts are now warning that you can test negative even if you’re infected and contagious while still being visibly healthy.</p> <p>In general, tests are able to reveal an omicron infection, but enough virus needs to have reproduced and appear at sufficiently high levels in the nose or saliva to be detectable, according to Dr. Michael Mina, an epidemiologist and former professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, whose interview on the podcast “In the Bubble,” hosted by former White House COVID-19 adviser Andy Slavitt, published this week.</p> <p>“Omicron does appear to be more infectious, so it might be taking off and actually spreading the first day or two before there’s enough virus in your nose to turn the [rapid] antigen test positive — or the PCR test positive, for that matter,” Mina said on the podcast. “You might already be infectious, and that’s potentially because the virus now is just so able to potentially aerosolize and get out of people at lower amounts.”</p> <p>The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has long warned that rapid antigen tests “may not detect an early” coronavirus infection. But those warnings hadn’t received much attention in the months preceding the omicron surge.</p> <p>People can be contagious regardless of whether they are showing symptoms, and many coronavirus-infected people will show no symptoms at all.</p> <p>Coronavirus-infected people can still test negative even after starting to show signs of symptoms of COVID-19, with subsequent tests over the next couple of days eventually turning positive.</p> <p>That’s what happened recently with the 28-year-old son of Dr. Robert Wachter, the chair of UC San Francisco’s Department of Medicine.</p>

He wrote recently that his son, who had received three shots of the Moderna vaccine, became symptomatic two days after watching a movie at home with a friend. The vaccinated friend subsequently tested positive, three days after the movie night.

The son's first rapid test, taken two days after the movie night, was negative, even though he was showing symptoms such as a sore throat, dry cough, muscle aches and chills, but no loss of taste or smell.

After he found out his friend tested positive, the son took another rapid test, which was positive. For this test, a swab was used in his throat before being placed in his nose.

It's "a bit gross," Wachter said, but it was done amid early data suggesting that omicron starts appearing at higher levels in the throat before it starts appearing at detectable levels in the nose. (Health authorities in Britain have produced a video on how to do this.)

Wachter's son is feeling better, with a mild sore throat and no fever five days after his symptoms began, Wachter said Monday.

For people who do show signs of illness, symptoms seem to start much earlier after exposure than with earlier variants, Mina wrote.

"This means that there is a chance the virus isn't yet growing in the nose when you first test," he said.

Some people have voiced alarm that rapid nasal swab tests may not pick up the coronavirus as early as rapid saliva swab tests. Mina said the nasal swabs still do a good job of detecting the virus for most of the days a person is contagious and remain helpful in stopping transmission.

"Just like a seat belt, these are all risk-mitigation strategies — they're not risk-erasing strategies. And so, just like a seat belt and an air bag, neither of them are perfect," Mina said on the podcast.

Among people who get the omicron variant and eventually show symptoms, signs of illness might appear as little as one to two days after exposure, with contagiousness beginning roughly two days after exposure, Mina said.

And the symptoms of someone who has been vaccinated, or has prior exposure to the virus, may start earlier than an unvaccinated person or one who hasn't been infected. That's because their immune systems have been taught to recognize the virus, Mina said.

Initial symptoms could be congestion, runny nose and fever, which are consistent with the immune system quickly recognizing the virus and attacking it.

By contrast, the immune system of a person who is unvaccinated or wasn't previously exposed to the coronavirus wouldn't be able to recognize it. In the pre-omicron phase of the pandemic, it generally took five to seven days before symptoms arose.

The earlier onset of symptoms following exposure to the coronavirus is a good development, Mina said. Before there was so much exposure to the coronavirus, many infected people who eventually developed symptoms were contagious for two to three days before they started feeling ill.

There is a potential blind spot of a day in which both PCR and antigen tests are unable to detect the contagious status of a coronavirus-positive person.

"Probably the first day that you're infectious with omicron, you're probably going to get a negative on [a rapid] antigen test," Mina said. As for a PCR test, there's a 50% chance the test result will be positive on the first day you're infectious, Mina said, but even then, the results wouldn't be available for a couple of days because of lab-processing time.

	<p>“On average, everyone should assume there might be as much as a day before any test would tell you that you’re positive,” Mina said.</p> <p>On the first day you’re contagious, you’ll likely not be “super infectious.” On the second day of contagiousness, however, “you might actually become pretty infectious,” Mina said. A rapid test will probably still be negative; a PCR test may be positive, but that result might not be available for a couple of days.</p> <p>It might take until the third day of contagiousness before a rapid test is positive, Mina said.</p> <p>Rapid tests are still helpful for determining whether a person is contagious for most of the days someone is capable of transmitting the virus. On the third or fourth day of infectiousness, when the level of virus produced by the body is astronomical, rapid tests do a good job of detecting high levels of coronavirus, Mina said.</p> <p>For tests that show you’re no longer contagious, a PCR test is not useful, experts say. They can show positive test results for weeks following an infection, long after a person has stopped being contagious.</p> <p>A rapid test starts showing negative results about the time contagiousness ends, Mina said. “If you don’t have [contagious levels of] virus, the antigen test tend to turn negative, and if you do, the antigen test tend to stay positive,” Mina said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 WHO: repeated boosters not viable strategy
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/repeated-covid-boosters-not-viable-strategy-against-new-variants-who-experts-warn
GIST	<p>World Health Organization experts have warned that repeating booster doses of the original Covid vaccines is not a viable strategy against emerging variants and called for new jabs that better protect against transmission.</p> <p>“A vaccination strategy based on repeated booster doses of the original vaccine composition is unlikely to be appropriate or sustainable,” the WHO Technical Advisory Group on Covid-19 Vaccine Composition (TAG-Co-VAC) said in a statement published on Tuesday.</p> <p>The group of experts, who are working to assess the performance of Covid-19 vaccines, called for the development of new vaccines that not only protect people who contract Covid against falling seriously ill but also better prevent people from catching the virus in the first place, in order to deal with emerging Covid variants such as Omicron.</p> <p>“Covid-19 vaccines that have high impact on prevention of infection and transmission, in addition to the prevention of severe disease and death, are needed and should be developed,” the advisory group said.</p> <p>This, it said, would help lower “community transmission and the need for stringent and broad-reaching public health and social measures”.</p> <p>It also suggested that vaccine developers should strive to create jabs that “elicit immune responses that are broad, strong, and long-lasting in order to reduce the need for successive booster doses”.</p> <p>As the virus evolves and until new vaccines are available, “the composition of current Covid-19 vaccines may need to be updated”, the group said.</p> <p>According to the WHO, 331 candidate vaccines are being worked on around the world. The UN health agency has so far given its stamp of approval to versions of eight different vaccines.</p>

A growing body of evidence indicates that the [Omicron](#) Covid variant is not only far more transmissible than previous variants, but also better at dodging some vaccine protections.

Earlier this week, Pfizer Inc chief executive Albert Bourla said a redesigned Covid-19 vaccine that specifically targets the [Omicron variant](#) is likely to be needed and his company could have one ready to launch by March.

Bourla said [Pfizer](#) and partner BioNTech SE are working on both an Omicron-targeted vaccine version as well as a shot that would include both the previous vaccine as well as one targeted at the fast-spreading variant.

“I think it is the most likely scenario,” Bourla said on Monday. “We’re working on higher doses. We’re working different schedules. We’re doing a lot of things right now, as we speak.”

The vaccine could be ready to distribute by June, Bourla added in an interview with [CNBC](#).

Meanwhile, a “tidal wave” of Omicron infections [risks infecting more than half the population of Europe](#) in the next two months and could submerge health systems across the region, Hans Kluge, the WHO’s [Europe](#) director, warned.

In a statement on Tuesday, Kluge said the region had recorded more than 7 million new cases in the first week of 2022, double the rate of a fortnight previously, with more than 1% of the population catching Covid-19 each week in 26 countries.

“At this rate, more than 50% of the population in the region will be infected with Omicron in the next six to eight weeks,” he said – a scale of transmission he described as unprecedented.

Infectious disease epidemiologist and WHO Covid-19 technical lead, Maria Van Kerkhove, provided an update during a [live Q&A session broadcast](#) on Tuesday.

“More than 15 million cases were reported in the last seven days. That’s a record high in this pandemic. We’ve actually had to readjust the scale in the figures in the epi curve [epidemic curve],” Van Kerkhove said, adding that more than 43,000 deaths were also reported and figures were likely to be an underestimate.

“This is up from 9.5 million that were reported last week so we are seeing a sharp increase in cases being reported around the world. About half of those have been reported from Europe, about 40% of all cases reported from the Americas with a high burden of cases from the US.”

The WHO has resisted the push to roll out blanket booster programmes in the battle against new concerning variants like Omicron, saying it makes no sense as many people in poorer nations are still waiting for a first jab, dramatically increasing the chance of new, more dangerous variants emerging.

So far, more than eight billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered in at least 219 territories, according to a count by Agence France-Presse.

While more than 67% of people in high income countries have received at least one jab, fewer than 11% have in low income countries, according to UN numbers.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid less dangerous as it evolves?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/11/will-covid-19-become-less-dangerous-as-it-evolves
GIST	The pandemic has been awash with slogans, but in recent weeks, two have been repeated with increasing frequency: “Variants will evolve to be milder” and “Covid will become endemic”. Yet experts warn that neither of these things can be taken for granted.

Those stating that viruses become less deadly over time often cite influenza. Both of the flu viruses responsible for the 1918 Spanish flu and 2009 swine flu pandemics eventually evolved to become less dangerous. However, the 1918 virus is thought to have become more deadly before it became milder. And other viruses, such as [Ebola](#), have become more dangerous over time.

“It’s a fallacy that viruses or pathogens become milder. If a virus can continue to be transmitted and cause lots of disease, it will,” said Prof David Robertson, head of viral genomics and bioinformatics at the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Virus Research.

Viruses aim to create as many copies of themselves and spread as widely as possible. Although it is not always in their best interests to kill their hosts, so long as they are transmitted before this happens, it doesn’t matter. Sars-CoV-2 doesn’t kill people during the period when it is most infectious; people tend to die two to three weeks after becoming ill. Provided it does not evolve to make people so ill that they do not, or cannot, mix with other people while they are infectious, the virus doesn’t care if there are some casualties along the way.

Neither is it clear that Sars-CoV-2 is becoming progressively milder. [Omicron appears to be less severe](#) than the Alpha or Delta variants – but both of these variants caused more severe illness than the original Wuhan strain. Importantly, viral evolution is not a one-way street: Omicron did not evolve from Delta, and Delta didn’t evolve from Alpha – it is more random and unpredictable than that.

“These [variants of concern] are not going one from the other, and so if that pattern continues, and another variant pops out in six months, it could be worse,” said Robertson. “It’s important not to assume that there’s some inevitability for Omicron to be the end of Sars-CoV-2’s evolution.”

There is a possibility that [Omicron is so transmissible](#) that it has hit a ceiling whereby future variants will struggle to outcompete it. But just a few months ago, people were saying the same thing about Delta. Also, Omicron is likely to keep evolving. “What might play out is that as Omicron infects so many people, it’s harder for that first Omicron [variant] to continue to be as successful, and so that creates a space for a virus that’s better at evading the immune response,” Robertson said.

What about the idea that Sars-CoV-2 [could become endemic](#)? Politicians tend to use this as a proxy for getting on with our lives and forgetting that Covid-19 exists. What endemic actually means is a disease that’s consistently present, but where rates of infection are predictable and not spiralling out of control “Smallpox was endemic, polio is endemic, Lassa fever is endemic, and malaria is endemic,” said Stephen Griffin, associate professor of virology at the University of Leeds. “Measles and mumps are endemic, but dependent on vaccination. Endemic does not mean that something loses its teeth at all.”

As more and more people develop immunity to Sars-CoV-2, or recover from infection, the virus may become less likely to trigger severe disease. But it could then evolve again. The good news is that this becomes less likely the more of the world’s population is vaccinated – because the fewer people who are infected, the fewer chances the virus has to evolve – but we’re not close to that yet. Even in the UK, there are large numbers of unvaccinated individuals, and it’s unclear how long the protection from boosters will last.

“The idea that we will achieve endemicity anytime soon also seems a little bit counter to the fact that we’ve just had several weeks of massively explosive exponential growth, and prior to that, we were still seeing exponential growth of Delta,” Griffin said.

Transforming Covid into a disease that we can truly live with requires more than a national vaccination campaign and wishful thinking; it requires a global effort to improve surveillance for new variants, and supporting countries to tackle outbreaks at source when they emerge. It also requires greater investment in air purification and ventilation to reduce transmission within our own borders, if we’re mixing indoors.

	Everyone hopes that the coronavirus will evolve to become milder, and that Covid becomes endemic – or rather, manageable enough not to blight our daily lives. But these are hopes, not facts, and repeating these mantras won't make them happen any faster.
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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid hospitalizations hit new high
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-hospitalizations-reported-in-u-s-hit-new-high-11641924596?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>U.S. hospitals are caring for the highest number of patients with Covid-19 reported during the pandemic, according to federal government data, as the Omicron variant worsens pressures on the already strained facilities.</p> <p>The U.S. seven-day average reached 140,576 people hospitalized with confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases on Tuesday, more than the previous high recorded during the surge last winter, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data.</p> <p>Hospitalization numbers from early in the pandemic aren't comprehensive enough to show levels from the earliest waves.</p> <p>The tallies suggest that a new onslaught of patients is arriving at many hospitals that have been struggling with staffing shortages and heavy caseloads, forcing doctors, nurses and responders to make even tougher decisions about who should get care.</p> <p>"Somebody somewhere is calling 911, and they are waiting longer for an ambulance," said Gerald Maloney, chief medical officer for the Geisinger health system's hospitals in Pennsylvania.</p> <p>The hospitalizations also reflect the breakneck pace of the current Covid-19 wave. Many people are showing up at hospitals for other reasons, some hospital and state data show, and then testing positive for Covid-19.</p> <p>Omicron, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated accounts for 98% of the country's Covid-19 cases, is likely to blame for most recent hospitalizations, though the government data doesn't break down the variant responsible.</p> <p>Signs suggest the highly transmissible new variant tends to cause milder disease and puts fewer patients in intensive care than earlier strains. The volume of hospitalizations, hospital officials and doctors say, reflects the variant's contagiousness.</p> <p>"It's a numbers game," said Michelle Prickett, a pulmonary and critical-care specialist at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital.</p> <p>By last week, the 11 hospitals in the larger Northwestern Medicine system had 16% more Covid-19 patients than in the last peak, hit in November 2020, and the rate is expected to grow, a spokeswoman said.</p> <p>Intensive-care patients in Dr. Prickett's hospital still need treatment for serious Covid-19 cases. "We are still seeing people struggling, we are still seeing the destruction of the lungs," she said.</p> <p>The hospitalizations record comes as reported Covid-19 cases in nursing homes hit a high among staff, and a near record among residents.</p> <p>The Journal analysis of hospitalization data looked at Covid-19 cases that were confirmed and suspected. Most of the reported hospitalizations are confirmed and averaged about 132,800 in the last seven days, which are in record territory, the federal data show.</p>

The data don't distinguish between people hospitalized for Covid-19, and those who are hospitalized for other reasons but test positive for the virus.

The high amount of Omicron circulating in communities is contributing to the number of people testing positive after routine screening, doctors say. It may also be a factor in the seriousness of their conditions.

Among a near-record 514 Covid-19 patients in the Jackson Health System's Miami-area hospitals Monday, for example, an estimated 54% were admitted mainly for non-Covid-19 reasons, the system said. The rate hit 27% at the peak of the Delta surge in August, the system said.

In New York state, counts of new admissions from two weeks starting in mid-December show patients admitted for other reasons but who also had Covid-19 accounted for 38% and 47% of the totals, up from less than a quarter during the same period a year earlier.

At the same time, the rate of pediatric patients recently admitted for non-Covid-19 reasons who test positive is down from a year ago, when far fewer children were hospitalized, New York data show.

The state health department advised against discounting as incidental or harmless Covid-19 infections found after people were hospitalized, saying the virus could be a contributing cause to the medical issue prompting hospitalization.

"People who are getting hospitalized right now, because we are so short of staff and capacity to care for everyone, they're very sick or they've been in a significant trauma," said Nancy Foster, vice president for quality and patient safety policy at the American Hospital Association. "They need to be in the hospital."

Hospitalizations have been fueled by record case numbers. By Monday, the U.S. seven-day average for new cases topped 750,000, according to Johns Hopkins University, about tripling the prior peak reached a year ago.

In the current wave, hospitals already under strain from heavy caseloads have faced an increase in admissions while growing numbers of nurses and other critical workers call out sick with Covid-19.

Hackensack Meridian Health in New Jersey, the state's largest system with 17 hospitals, recently had between 750 and 1,000 of its 35,000 employees out sick with Covid-19, said Daniel Varga, the chief physician executive there.

"The challenge has just been the sheer numbers of folks that have been affected, both patients who are coming in but also team members and physicians who are there to care for these folks," Dr. Varga said.

The good news, he said, is today's Covid-19 patients tend to be younger, less sick and have shorter hospital stays compared with patients Hackensack Meridian saw during its high point for Covid-19 hospitalizations in spring 2020.

Omicron hasn't triggered a record for those who need critical care. The seven-day average for confirmed and suspected adult ICU cases reached 23,334 on Tuesday, about 5,900 off the record from a year ago.

Still, staffing shortages have led some hospitals to close beds to new patients, while others haven't been able to add capacity to keep up with demand, hospital officials and doctors say.

Patients wait for hospital beds in crowded emergency rooms at some facilities, while ambulances wait longer for patients to be retrieved. Some hospitals are putting off nonessential surgeries.

About 17% of Covid-19 patients recently hospitalized at Mass General Brigham's hospitals in Massachusetts and New Hampshire were in intensive-care beds, down from 23% during the peak of the surge roughly a year ago, said Ron Walls, the hospital system's chief operating officer.

In April 2020, the figure was 35%, at its peak.

Dr. Walls said he believed the declining share of Covid-19 patients who need intensive care is likely a result of improved treatment and an increase of people who have been vaccinated.

There are also signs fewer patients need help from ventilators. Across HonorHealth's six Arizona hospitals, for example, around 11% of patients with Covid-19 this month have required a ventilator, down from 15% in late December, said James Whitfill, a physician and the six-hospital system's chief transformation officer.

Yet unvaccinated patients can become seriously ill, physicians said. Less than 1% of patients with Covid-19 recently in HonorHealth's Arizona hospitals had gotten a booster shot, Dr. Whitfill said. About 85% are completely unvaccinated, he said.

Covid-19 deaths, a lagging indicator, were recently averaging about 1,650 a day, according to Johns Hopkins University data, though holiday-reporting disruptions have made the recent trend difficult to see. The U.S. topped 2,000 deaths a day in September during the Delta surge and 3,000 daily deaths early last year.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Boeing loses ground to Airbus
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/boeing-loses-ground-to-airbus-on-jet-deliveries-11641928220?mod=hp_list_pos1
GIST	<p>Boeing Co. sold more aircraft than Airbus SE last year but delivered half as many passenger jets, in a sign of the changing landscape facing the world's two dominant plane makers.</p> <p>Chicago-based Boeing said Tuesday that it won orders for 909 planes in 2021 but delivered only around 280 passenger jets, falling behind Airbus and relying more on its cargo jets and military versions of commercial planes. Including cancellations, Boeing secured 535 net new orders, including older deals for 56 planes that it now considers more likely to be fulfilled.</p> <p>Airbus on Monday said it delivered 611 jets in 2021 and won orders for 771, or 507 net of cancellations. Deliveries, when airlines and other customers typically pay half or more of the purchase price, are closely watched by investors. Analysts expect Boeing to report sales of almost \$65 billion for 2021 when it reports results on Jan. 26, up from \$58.2 billion in 2020 when it delivered only 157 jets.</p> <p>Boeing and Airbus still have orders for thousands of planes that are planned for delivery over the next several years, even as airlines continue to work through the Covid-19 pandemic that left global air capacity, measured by available seats, 35% lower last year than pre-pandemic 2019, according to data provider OAG.</p> <p>The two companies for decades have vied for the title of the world's biggest plane maker by deliveries. Airbus has now held that title for the third year running as Boeing remains hampered with the crisis that engulfed its 737 MAX and production problems with its 787 Dreamliner. Boeing has built up an inventory of more than 100 undelivered Dreamliners as it addresses various manufacturing issues and seeks regulatory approvals.</p> <p>Airbus now commands 60% of the market for the bestselling workhorse jets such as the A321neo, which airlines use on big domestic routes and, increasingly, for international service. That share is set to climb higher, said Richard Aboulafia, managing director at AeroDynamic Advisory, a consultant.</p>

Boeing has shelved plans for an all-new jet to focus on producing existing models and winning regulatory backing for ones already under development. Still, the largest version of the MAX has been outsold by the rival Airbus plane by almost six to one, based on year-end orders of planes still to be delivered.

Airbus has been faster to restore production trimmed early in the pandemic, while Boeing has taken longer to boost output, as it awaits regulators' approval for fixes to the 787.

Boeing's order total last year included carriers who couldn't get their hands on new Airbus jets. Las Vegas-based Allegiant Air last week agreed to buy up to 100 MAX jets, its first Boeing purchase. Maury Gallagher, chief executive of parent Allegiant Travel Co., said any new Airbus planes the airline ordered now wouldn't be received till near the end of the decade.

"What we have to accept is it was an opportunistic transaction driven largely by availability and pricing," Airbus Chief Commercial Officer Christian Scherer said this week of the Allegiant deal.

Airbus has been aggressively ramping up production of its narrow-body aircraft as it looks to capitalize on the recovery in air travel and its rival's production woes. The company has said it hasn't been able to build aircraft quickly enough, leaving its bestselling aircraft, the A320neo, sold out over the next few years even as it aims to return to pre-pandemic production levels in the second quarter of 2023.

"We had some very significant orders in 2021 which I think is a sign of many customers looking beyond Covid," Airbus CEO Guillaume Faury said, adding that he hadn't expected a strong year of orders.

Boeing declined to comment, citing a quiet period ahead of its coming earnings release. Executives have previously said production plans hinge on a recovery in airline traffic—which they expect to reach 2019 levels in 2023 or 2024—and the resumption of deliveries to China.

While Airbus and Boeing have traded the top spot for orders and deliveries multiple times over the past decade, the U.S. company has more often been the largest by the total value of deals. Boeing has tended to produce more wide body planes, which carry higher prices.

That gap also narrowed over the past two years, and the sharp drop in intercontinental travel during the pandemic has made such twin-aisle planes tougher to sell. Boeing's new 777X jet is also three years late and still awaiting regulatory approval, with the first not due to be delivered until the end of 2023 at the earliest.

The 777X will fill a gap left by the 747, which Boeing will stop producing this year. Cargo specialist Atlas Air Worldwide Holdings Inc. is due to take the last plane from the line in October, more than 52 years after Pan American World Airways received the first.

Boeing has relied more on military versions of passenger planes and cargo jets to generate sales in the wide-body market it once dominated. The boom in airfreight helped drive record orders and deliveries for freighters last year.

Airbus, which announced a new wide-body freighter last year to challenge Boeing's dominance in that segment, has the advantage of still being able to deliver to Chinese airlines, a market all but closed to Boeing at present because of broader trade tensions between the U.S. and China.

China accounted for a quarter of Boeing's order book before the pandemic, but it hasn't ordered new jets since 2017. More than 100 MAX jets destined for Chinese carriers remain undelivered, awaiting a signoff from Chinese regulators that Boeing has said it hopes will come in 2022.

Airbus delivered more than 90 planes into mainland China last year, while Boeing managed only two via aircraft leasing companies. Most of the 475 Boeing MAX jets that entered service last year, a mix of new deliveries and others restored to operation, were in the Americas and Europe rather than Asia.

HEADLINE	01/11 Southern Calif. ports struggle clear backlog
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/southern-california-ports-struggle-to-trim-cargo-backlog-as-omicron-surges-11641938505?mod=hp_minor_pos13
GIST	<p>The Covid-19 Omicron variant is hampering efforts to clear a backlog of about 100 container ships at the nation's busiest port complex as infections rise among Southern California dockworkers.</p> <p>About 800 dockworkers—roughly 1 in 10 of the daily workforce at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach—were unavailable for Covid-related reasons as of Monday, according to the Pacific Maritime Association. Absentees included workers who tested positive for the virus, were quarantining or awaiting test results, or who felt unwell.</p> <p>The association, which secures labor for terminal operators on the West Coast, said the number of daily worker infections has risen rapidly in recent weeks, escalating from several cases a day to dozens and then hitting about 150 a day last week.</p> <p>The shortfall meant that on Monday two container ships at the port complex received fewer dockworkers than requested and 13 ships didn't receive any requested workers to load or unload cargo, effectively halting operations. That same day, 102 container ships waited for a berth at the port complex, according to the Marine Exchange of Southern California, which monitors ship movements in the area.</p> <p>Dozens of vessels have waited weeks or months to unload cargo at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach as a crush of imports has overwhelmed logistics operations that deliver goods to U.S. markets. The backlog rose to 100 ships in late November and reached a record 106 vessels on New Year's Day. Before the pandemic it was unusual for more than one ship to wait for a berth.</p> <p>Alan McCorkle, chief executive of Yusen Terminals LLC at the Port of Los Angeles, said the rise in coronavirus infections has extended a worker shortage that began over the Christmas and New Year holidays, reducing productivity at his terminal by about 20%. "It's just going to prolong the catch-up," he said.</p> <p>Dockworkers helped move record cargo volumes last year and are just as susceptible to Covid infections as other workers, said Frank Ponce De Leon, an official with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which represents West Coast port workers. Los Angeles County, where many port workers live, logged 200,000 positive coronavirus cases for the week that ended Jan. 8, a record.</p> <p>The labor shortages in Southern California come as surging Covid-19 cases ripple through global supply chains, slowing production at U.S. factories and shutting factories and clogging ports in China. Denmark-based marine consulting firm Sea-Intelligence ApS said in a report Tuesday that congestion and bottlenecks are worsening at ports in the U.S. and Europe.</p> <p>The Southern California port complex is the main ocean gateway for U.S. imports from Asia, handling about 40% of containerized cargo. The ports struggled last year to handle record import volumes that surged about 20% compared with pre-Covid levels in 2019 as businesses rushed to restock inventories and Americans switched their pandemic-era spending from services to goods.</p> <p>The Biden administration last year took measures aimed at reducing the backlog, including efforts to prod Southern California terminals to move toward 24-hour operations that had limited success.</p> <p>Port of Long Beach Deputy Executive Director Noel Hacegaba said in a statement that the port's terminals remain open and continue to offer some extended hours despite the increase in worker infections. The Port of Los Angeles referred questions about labor shortages to the Pacific Maritime Association.</p> <p>Jim McKenna, the association's chief executive, said terminals might be able to catch up on some of the work backlog if factories in Asia reduce operations during the Lunar New Year, which begins in a few</p>

	weeks. But he cautioned that most of his members, who include the world's largest ocean carriers, expect the cargo surge to continue through the next six months, if not through the end of 2022.
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HEADLINE	01/11 Flight cancelations snarl airfreight shipping
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/cascading-flight-cancellations-snarl-airfreight-shipments-11641919407?mod=hp_minor_pos14
GIST	<p>Airfreight forwarders are off to a turbulent start to the New Year as flight cancellations have sharply reduced aircraft capacity and disrupted expedited shipping operations.</p> <p>Though cancellations eased over the past few days, airlines have scrubbed thousands of flights in recent weeks because of winter storms and staffing shortages tied to surging Covid-19 cases.</p> <p>That has forced the freight forwarders that serve as middlemen between air carriers and companies shipping goods to scramble for alternative flights and to reroute shipments, from clothing and pharmaceuticals to printer cartridges and electronics, that fly in the bellies of passenger planes.</p> <p>The cancellations have delayed deliveries and added to transportation costs for retailers and manufacturers seeking to fly goods over clogged ocean ports around the world.</p> <p>Itasca, Ill.-based AIT Worldwide Logistics Inc. recently had to switch airlines for a 100-ton shipment scheduled to fly from the U.S. to Hong Kong for a major technology customer because the first carrier didn't have enough ground handlers to unload the cargo at its destination, AIT Chief Executive Vaughn Moore said.</p> <p>"We had to pivot very quickly," said Mr. Moore, adding that the past several weeks "have been extremely taxing," with staff shortages and quarantine rules for crew members complicating air-cargo operations. In some cases, AIT has switched airports and even moved items by truck to their final destination.</p> <p>U.S. airlines have canceled more than a thousand flights daily over the past two weeks. FedEx Corp. last week said the spread of the Omicron variant is contributing to staff shortages and delays in shipments traveling by air.</p> <p>The tumult has freight forwarders "literally playing whack-a-mole" as they try to rebook cargo, said Marc Schlossberg, executive vice president of airfreight at Unique Logistics International Inc., a New York-based freight forwarder.</p> <p>On Dec. 30, a flight flying from Hanoi to the U.S. loaded with cargo for a Unique Logistics fashion retailer customer was canceled because there weren't enough crew members due to Omicron-related quarantines. It took several days for Unique Logistics to get the goods on another jet out of Vietnam, Mr. Schlossberg said.</p> <p>The disruptions have delayed air cargo shipments by two to four days in recent weeks, said Brian Bourke, chief growth officer at Seko Logistics LLC, another freight forwarder based in Itasca, outside Chicago.</p> <p>On Jan. 7, Seko warned customers that it was "experiencing challenges moving freight to and from many cities throughout the Continental U.S. via domestic airfreight" because of weather and Covid-19-related labor shortages. The company plans to issue another alert this week warning of disruptions across all modes of freight transportation, Mr. Bourke said.</p> <p>Airfreight demand has soared in recent months as companies have sought to fly goods around bottlenecks in supply chains.</p>

	<p>Shippers are using airfreight for heavy items such as exercise bikes and lower-value goods like discount store merchandise that would usually ship by ocean, said Brandon Fried, executive director of the Airforwarders Association, a trade group. “Usually, it’s electronics and high-value goods that have a definitive market shelf life” that would travel by air, he said.</p> <p>Demand softened in December but it remains elevated compared with the same month in 2020, Mr. Fried said, “and that’s probably a direct result of the congestion” at the ports.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Seattle officials demand SPD ‘ruse’ answers
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3308382/spd-misinformation-campaign-has-council-mayors-office-demanding-answers/
GIST	<p>With the conclusion of an investigation into the Seattle Police Department’s faked radio chatter— which falsely suggested the presence of far right-right “Proud Boy” protesters around Seattle’s East Precinct at the pinnacle of 2020 protests — a number of question remain unanswered.</p> <p>One which Seattle City Council attempted to address Tuesday is how this will affect police reform and accountability in the future, and what role, if any, “ruses” will play with Seattle’s police officers.</p> <p>Officially, a ruse is defined as a legally sanctioned process by a which an officer can misrepresent information to obtain evidence in a criminal investigation.</p> <p>According to an investigation launched by Seattle’s Office of Police Accountability (OPA) — prompted by reporting done by Converge Media’s Omari Salisbury and activist Matt Watson — police officers with “virtually no supervision” suggested on radio chatter in 2020 that a group of armed “Proud Boys” were making their way towards the East Precinct, and in so doing “added fuel to the fire,” according to OPA Director Andrew Myerberg.</p> <p>Myerberg presented his report Tuesday to the council’s Public Safety and Human Services Committee. In that presentation, he detailed why this particular ruse was challenging to investigate.</p> <p>Primarily, he pointed out, neither documentation of the attempt nor chain of command accountability were found. The OPA determined that the operation was conducted by the Seattle Police Operations Center (SPOC) at the behest of “Named Employee #1,” then captain of the East Precinct Bryan Grenon, as identified by the Seattle Times.</p> <p>OPA then conducted interviews with officers named by Grenon, and “ultimately [was] able to identify nearly all the officers that were on the audio recording,” Myerberg said in the committee meeting.</p> <p>“What became very clear was that... there was virtually no supervision or guidance that was provided to any of the officers,” Myerberg continued. “This ruse or this effort was generically created by Named Employee #1 who did not provide significant supervision to ... all the other officers. There were other officers that did use misinformation as well.”</p> <p>“We used the ruse policy because it was the best fit for this case,” he clarified. “But really, this isn’t a true ruse. This is a misinformation campaign.”</p> <p>Those findings prompted public safety chair Lisa Herbold to call “for increased oversight of SPD’s use of deceptive tactics, or ruses,” according to a press release from her office last week.</p> <p>“Councilmember Herbold is requesting that SPD and OPA immediately work together to both fully implement OPA’s 2019 recommendation and create a clear policy requiring that SPD’s use of ruses be fully documented, which has not occurred in the past,” referencing a 2019 OPA investigation which determined that another ruse contributed to a man’s suicide.</p>

Tuesday's committee hearing was attended by Herbold, Senior Deputy Mayor Monisha Harrell, and Councilmember Andrew Lewis, among others.

A common refrain among them was the lack of transparency between SPD and municipal government, with the deputy mayor noting that she "was made aware of this case through an article in the Seattle Times," a sentiment echoed by several.

Lewis made the point that the incident is of an ilk with other fallout from the 2020 protests, and that there are similar threads among them. Referencing Federal District Court Judge Richard Jones' 2020 contempt finding, "Jones determined that the use of force and the tactics SPD [used] were ... harsher because of the ... speech that the protesters were using," Lewis said.

"I go back to those because I think when we have these conversations, we need to really center what we're talking about ... we had a department that was engaged in really concerning activity ... this investigation is one of a whole bunch of episodes that led an article three judge, appointed by a president, confirmed by the U.S. Senate, to say that our police department was being specifically brutal to protesters."

Lewis asked why the operation was exclusive to SPOC and Captain Grenon, and why there was not more oversight from chain of command.

"We're just hearing an awful lot [about how] people in the high command didn't know things," Lewis continued. "My concern is at what point should .. there [be] consequences for people not making themselves aware of these things that were happening, if they're in a position of that level of authority and command over the police service in the city?"

"I would say nothing about this case is common," Myerberg responded. "I think that's the reality. It's really difficult to answer because I've never seen that happen. I've never seen this happen before."

Lewis contextualized the ruse with the "[pink umbrella incident](#)" where a similar breakdown of the chain of command occurred.

"Interim Chief [Adrian] Diaz [has] ... set a precedent," Lewis offered. "It seems like by that standard of chain of command that's being applied, there should be more that's happening with how this ruse is dealt with ... I'm tired of being in a position where I'm reading in the news about the latest thing that comes out to 2020, and everything gets fobbed off on a mid-level person."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Preliminary finding Philadelphia fire cause
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/us/philadelphia-fire-christmas-tree.html
GIST	<p>The fire that broke out in a Philadelphia rowhouse last Wednesday, leaving 12 dead including nine children, was most likely caused when a 5-year-old boy ignited a Christmas tree with a lighter, city officials said on Tuesday.</p> <p>The fire erupted before dawn, quickly engulfing the second story of a brick rowhouse in the city's Fairmount neighborhood. The 5-year-old, one of only two people in the apartment who survived, told the police last week that he had been playing with the lighter, forming the earliest theory about the fire's cause.</p> <p>Investigators looked for other possible sources of the fire but found nothing that disproved the account given by the child, who was the only person in the part of the apartment where the blaze began, Adam K. Thiel, the Philadelphia fire commissioner, said in a news conference.</p> <p>"We are left with the words of that 5-year-old child, that traumatized 5-year-old child, to help us understand how the lighter and the tree came together with tragic consequences," Commissioner Thiel said. "We have disproved any other theories."</p>

[There were 14 people in the apartment at the time](#) — not 18, as officials had originally said — and all but the 5-year-old were in the bedrooms on the third floor. Twelve of them died, including three sisters and nine of their sons and daughters. Two people, including the 5-year-old and a man who climbed out of a third-story window, were hospitalized with injuries.

The findings announced on Tuesday were the result of a preliminary investigation by the Fire Marshal's Office as well as other city and federal agencies, officials said.

The rowhouse was one of the Philadelphia Housing Authority's "scattered site" properties, places throughout the city that are owned and managed by the authority but are not part of larger public housing complexes. It was divided into two units: an upper unit, where the fire broke out, and a lower unit, where eight people lived, all of whom escaped.

Officials with the housing authority said last week that the upstairs apartment had been inspected in May, and that all of the smoke alarms, which were battery operated, had been found working at the time.

In the news conference on Tuesday, Commissioner Thiel said investigators found seven smoke alarms in the unit after the fire. Four were found in drawers; one was found on the floor, its battery removed; and another was attached to a ceiling, its battery removed as well. The seventh alarm, which was in a basement shared by the two units, had activated, but its alerts came too late, given how quickly the fire spread in the upper floors.

The city also released the names of the dead on Tuesday. The three adults who died were Rosalee McDonald, Virginia Thomas and Quinsha White. The children were Dekwan Robinson, Destiny McDonald, Janiyah Roberts, J'Kwan Robinson, Natasha Wayne, Quientien Tate-McDonald, Shaniece Wayne, Taniesha Robinson and Tiffany Robinson. All died of smoke inhalation, according to the Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office.

The tragedy brought renewed attention to a dire shortage of quality low-income housing in the city and across the country. The waiting list for new public housing units in Philadelphia, a city with a large population under the poverty line, runs to 40,000 households and has been closed for nearly a decade.

The extended family had moved into the rowhouse apartment in 2011, having outgrown a smaller home elsewhere in public housing. Since moving in, the number of occupants on the lease had grown from six to 14 as the families grew. While some members of the family had told friends and social workers that they wanted to move, officials with the housing authority say that no one in the apartment had formally requested a new place.

City officials emphasized that Philadelphia's housing stock was old and needed to be updated to modern safety standards, such as smoke alarms wired directly into the building. That requires a significant amount of spending, said Kelvin Jeremiah, the director of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, money that the agency does not have.

"This incident," he said on Tuesday, "highlights the fundamental truth that there is, in fact, an affordable housing crisis in the city."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Seattle maestro resigns by email: 'not safe'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/arts/music/seattle-symphony-thomas-dausgaard.html
GIST	On Christmas morning, at his seaside home near Copenhagen, the Danish conductor Thomas Dausgaard made a difficult decision: He would step down as the music director of the Seattle Symphony, effective immediately, more than a year before the end of his contract.

He pressed send on a resignation email on Jan. 3 — blindsiding an orchestra that was expecting his arrival a few weeks later to lead a world premiere and a Tchaikovsky symphony, and forcing the organization to scramble to find replacements for his remaining dates this season.

Dausgaard, 58, had seemed a good fit for his position, which he had held just since fall 2019. But he was separated from the acclaimed orchestra for much of 2020 and 2021 because of pandemic-related [travel restrictions](#). And he had grown increasingly frustrated by what he described in an interview as a strained relationship with the orchestra's managers, accusing the administration of repeatedly trying to silence and intimidate him. (The Seattle Symphony denies his allegations.)

"I felt personally not safe," Dausgaard said, providing few specifics as he offered his first public comments on his abrupt resignation, which the orchestra announced on Friday. "I felt threatened."

Jon Rosen, the chairman of the orchestra's board, said in an interview, "There's no accuracy to any allegations that there was a hostile environment or that he was, in fact, unsafe."

By the time he returned to Europe, after finally making it to Seattle for a stint this fall, the board had grown increasingly disenchanted with Dausgaard. In late November the board privately decided not to renew his contract, which was to have ended after the 2022-23 season, according to two people briefed on the decision who were granted anonymity to discuss personnel matters.

It is an unusually bitter, and open, rupture. Fraught relations between artists and administrators are hardly uncommon in classical music, which teems with big personalities. But the problems rarely break into view, or result in the immediate departure of music directors, who are often the public faces of their organizations.

The situation also highlights the strain the pandemic has placed on ensembles across the country. Many are grappling with waves of cancellations, visa delays and financial woes, among other problems.

The uncertainty has led some artists to reconsider their careers. In September, Jaap van Zweden, the New York Philharmonic's music director, [announced plans](#) to step down in 2024, saying the pandemic had made him rethink his priorities. (He agreed to extend his original contract for a year before departing, to give the orchestra more time to find a successor.)

Dausgaard said that while he had considered resigning before the pandemic, the past two years had clarified his thinking.

"I felt my life is too precious to be in such tension," he said.

Dausgaard's association with the Seattle Symphony goes back more than a decade. He began appearing as a guest in 2010 and became principal guest conductor in 2014 — so it was something of [an internal hire](#) when he was named music director in 2017, with his tenure officially beginning in 2019. A live recording of concerts that year, featuring works by Strauss and Scriabin, was nominated for a Grammy.

Around the time Dausgaard was named music director, the symphony underwent a series of personnel changes. Krishna Thiagarajan, an experienced arts administrator, took over as president and chief executive in 2018. Some veteran leaders, such as Elena Dubinets, who oversaw artistic planning, departed.

Dausgaard said he felt the culture of the organization shifted and became "ruled by fear." At one point, he said, an employee of the orchestra was pressured to make negative comments about him to the administration. (The symphony denies the accusation.)

In February 2020 Dausgaard brought a list of grievances to the board, which investigated his accusations but found they did not have merit, Rosen said.

"We took it seriously," Rosen added. "There was no validity to the charges."

The board tried to make Dausgaard feel more at ease, said Rosen, who began meeting with Dausgaard weekly and was present when Dausgaard met with Thiagarajan.

But then the pandemic proved a turning point. Dausgaard was abroad from March 2020 until November 2021 largely because he was unable to get a visa to enter the United States, which imposed a ban on travelers from 33 countries.

The restrictions upended the classical music industry, stranding star musicians overseas and leading to a series of high-profile cancellations. But they were particularly disruptive in Seattle, with communication between Dausgaard and the orchestra reduced to town hall-style meetings on Zoom.

“It became sort of like a long-distance marriage that just wasn’t going to be working,” Rosen said.

Dausgaard finally received a visa and returned to Benaroya Hall in Seattle in November to great fanfare, for a program of Beethoven and Brahms. But the following week he canceled, citing illness, frustrating some board members and players. He returned to Denmark in late November.

Thiagarajan, in an interview, praised Dausgaard as “very inspiring” and “a man of conviction.” He said the symphony was doing its best to support him, including by allowing him to end his contract early without penalty.

The orchestra, [like others](#), is at a delicate moment. It lost \$15 million in anticipated ticket revenue over the first two years of the pandemic. Ticket sales remain far below prepandemic levels — attendance this season is down by about a third — creating financial pressures. And without a music director, around whom marketing is often focused, attracting audiences and donations is even more difficult.

“It’s a double threat,” said Thomas W. Morris, a veteran orchestra administrator. “They’ve got to move quite expeditiously to reassert artistic leadership.”

Donors said they were taken aback by Dausgaard’s decision. “It was very abrupt, a very big surprise,” said Rebecca Benaroya, a member of the family for whom the orchestra’s hall is named. “He was hardly there.”

Charles Simonyi, another prominent donor, said that he was worried the orchestra would be without a music director during a vulnerable time, but that he believed it could weather the crisis.

“We are saddened that he is leaving the symphony,” said Simonyi, a software executive. “But we are looking forward to the renewal of the energy of the whole organization.”

When he took over as music director, Dausgaard was generally well regarded among the orchestra’s musicians. But his prolonged absence during the pandemic frustrated some, who began to have doubts about his commitment to the ensemble, according to interviews with players who asked not to be named for fear of retribution.

Joseph Kaufman, the associate principal bass, praised Dausgaard as a “brilliant musician.”

“Nobody should fault him for living his life as he sees fit,” Kaufman said. “We all deserve that, don’t we?”

A series of guests, including Dausgaard’s predecessor, Ludovic Morlot, will take over the concerts he was to have led over the remainder of the season. The orchestra said it would soon begin a search for a new music director. (The New York Philharmonic is also looking, as are major ensembles in Chicago, Indianapolis, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Salt Lake City and elsewhere.)

“We’re looking for someone who is interested and dedicated to being here, and keeping us on the trajectory of excellence that we have greatly appreciated and loved having with Thomas, and before that

also with Ludo, and of course before that with Gerry Schwarz,” Thiagarajan said, referring to Morlot and his predecessor, Gerard Schwarz.

The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, of which Dausgaard is chief conductor, announced last week that he would not conduct a concert this Thursday, quoting him in a statement as saying that “traveling at this moment in the pandemic is sadly not an option for me.” But in the interview, he said he would remain with that ensemble, and that he would miss the players in Seattle.

“It is the musical part which will always shine over the rest,” he said. “It’s the memories I have in my heart — of the music and of the wonderful musicians.”

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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid leading cause police deaths 2021
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/11/covid-19-deaths-among-cops-push-law-enforcement-de/
GIST	<p>More than 300 police officers died after contracting COVID-19 while on duty in 2021 — the biggest driver of death in a record year for law enforcement fatalities in the U.S., according to a preliminary study released Tuesday.</p> <p>The 458 officers who either died of COVID-19 or were killed in the line of duty last year is up 55% from the 295 officers in 2020 and the highest number since 312 in 1930, according to a report by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.</p> <p>The leading cause of death was COVID-19, which claimed 301 officers, nearly two-thirds of the total and more than twice the next two leading causes combined: felonious assaults (84) and firearms (62).</p> <p>The COVID-19 number, according to the group’s annual study, is based on reports from federal, state, local and tribal agencies that have specifically attributed the deaths of their officers to on-the-job exposure to the coronavirus.</p> <p>“The year 2021 will go down as the year of the most line-of-duty fatalities since 1930 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in traffic fatalities and firearms ambushes,” said Marcia Ferranto, the memorial fund’s chief executive.</p> <p>Because officers are still being exposed to the virus while on the job, the organization says, “the number of line-of-duty deaths is sadly ever-increasing.”</p> <p>In 2020, 145 officers died of COVID, the group said.</p> <p>Of the 84 officers killed in felonious assaults, 62 were fatally shot. The most common fatal shootings were ambush-style attacks (19), more than three times the number recorded in 2020 (six).</p> <p>Three weeks ago, Baltimore police officer Keona Holley died after she was shot in the head while sitting in her patrol car.</p> <p>Michael Mancuso, president of the Baltimore City Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 3, said “as law enforcement personnel, we know full well the risks involved in our chosen profession — something we and our families deal with on a daily basis.”</p> <p>“But nothing about police officer Holley’s death can be imagined or prepared for in advance,” Mr. Mancuso said on Dec. 23. “Keona’s life had meaning and mattered to her family, her friends and her colleagues, and now she is gone.”</p>

Tuesday's report shows that 11 of the officers who died from felonious attacks were struck by traffic, four were beaten to death, three were killed in car crashes, two were stabbed to death and two died of 9/11-related illnesses.

Patrick Yoes, president of the National Fraternal Order of Police, said the deadly violence against law enforcement is driven by increasing hostility toward police.

"The recent erosion of respect for law enforcement coupled with public figures spewing anti-police rhetoric have fueled more aggression towards police officers than what has been seen in previous years — undoubtedly emboldening violent criminals to commit brazen acts of violence against law enforcement," Mr. Yoes said in a press release last week.

"If these violent criminals are willing to commit brazen acts of violence against the men and women of law enforcement, we can't begin to fathom what heinous acts they are willing to commit against law-abiding citizens," he said.

According to the report, the spike in traffic-related fatalities is "cause for concern" for law enforcement agencies. The 58 officers killed in traffic-related incidents last year is up 38% from 2020, when 42 were killed.

The majority of the 458 total officers killed as of Dec. 31 worked in heavily populated states, including Texas (84), followed by Florida (52), Georgia (39), California (24), North Carolina (21) and Tennessee (18). The states where no police were killed through December were Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Vermont.

Laura Cooper, executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, told The Washington Times on Tuesday that "of the many lives lost to COVID, gunfire, traffic accidents, 9/11-related illnesses and more, the resolve of those who have chosen to serve remains steadfast."

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund is dedicated to memorializing law enforcement officials who die in the line of duty.

"This time of year always reminds us of the sacrifice of law enforcement and the importance of our mission to honor the fallen, tell the story of American law enforcement and make it safer for those who serve," Ms. Ferranto said.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Quebec: financial penalty for unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/11/quebec-announces-financial-penalty-for-unvaccinate/
GIST	<p>MONTREAL — The premier of the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec announced Tuesday that adult residents who refuse to get vaccinated against COVID-19 will be charged a financial penalty.</p> <p>Premier Francois Legault said not getting vaccinated leads to consequences for the health care system and not all Quebecers should pay for that.</p> <p>He said the levy will only apply to people who do not qualify for medical exemptions. It is the first time a government in Canada has announced a financial penalty for people who refuse to be vaccinated against COVID-19.</p> <p>Legault said the amount of the penalty hasn't been decided, but will be "significant." More details are to be released at a later date.</p> <p>He said about 10% of adults in Quebec are unvaccinated, but they represent about 50% of intensive care patients.</p>

	<p>“Those who refuse to get their first doses in the coming weeks will have to pay a new health contribution,” Legault said.</p> <p>“The majority are asking that there be consequences. ... It’s a question of fairness for the 90% of the population that have made some sacrifices. We owe them.”</p> <p>Quebec previously announced a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew. Officials said that will come off as soon as things improve.</p> <p>Quebec reported 62 more deaths attributed to the novel coronavirus, pushing the total number of people killed by COVID-19 in the province to 12,028, the most in Canada.</p> <p>In Greece, those over 60 have until Jan. 16 to get their first jabs or be fined 100 euros (\$113) for every month they remain unvaccinated. Austria’s health minister announced last month the government plans to impose fines of up to 3,600 euros (around \$4,000) on people who flout a coronavirus vaccine mandate it aims to introduce in February for all residents age 14 and over.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Airlines: China forcing flight cancelations
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/11/us-airlines-say-china-is-forcing-them-to-cancel-fl/
GIST	<p>U.S. airlines say China has blocked more than a dozen recent and future flights from entering the country, which has been tightening already-strict COVID-19 travel restrictions.</p> <p>China ordered the cancellations after some passengers tested positive for COVID-19 on flights that arrived in China in late December, according to industry officials.</p> <p>American Airlines said Tuesday that six of its flights from Dallas-Fort Worth to Shanghai in late January and early February have been canceled. United Airlines said it was forced to cancel six flights from San Francisco to Shanghai later this month. Delta Air Lines said it canceled one flight last week and another this Friday to Shanghai.</p> <p>Airlines for America, which represents the largest U.S. passenger and cargo carriers, said it was discussing the matter with U.S. and Chinese government officials to find ways to minimize the impact on travelers.</p> <p>The Biden administration had no immediate comment.</p> <p>The blocking of flights is the latest development in a dispute between the two countries over international flights and rules designed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.</p> <p>China has been ratcheting up travel restrictions after recent outbreaks of COVID-19 as it prepares to host the Winter Olympics in early February. China limits capacity on inbound flights - currently to 75% - and requires passengers to be tested before departure and after arriving in the country.</p> <p>If passengers test positive, the airline that carried them can be forced to cancel two to four flights, depending on the number of positive cases.</p> <p>Last month, Delta said new requirements for cleaning planes between flights caused a plane bound for Shanghai to return to Seattle. The airline said the new rules extended the time planes would need to sit on the ground in Shanghai, and weren’t workable. The Chinese consulate in San Francisco lodged a protest over Delta’s decision.</p> <p>In 2020, the Trump administration backed down from a threat to block four Chinese airlines after China agreed to let United and Delta resume limited operations that were shuttered earlier in the pandemic.</p>

	Last August, the U.S. Transportation Department limited the number of passengers on four Chinese airlines' flights to the U.S. after China imposed similar limits on United Airlines. The U.S. said China was putting an unreasonable burden on U.S. airlines for travelers who test positive after arriving in China.
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HEADLINE	01/11 Russia: looming surge omicron infections
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/11/russia-infections-could-surge-6-times-higher-due-t/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — Russian officials on Tuesday sounded the alarm about a looming surge of coronavirus infections due to the highly contagious omicron variant, but stopped short of announcing new restrictions in a hard-hit country where very few limits are in place.</p> <p>Russia already has by far Europe's highest pandemic toll at over 317,000 dead. The warning on Tuesday comes just weeks after new infections and deaths in Russia began to decline following another record-breaking surge.</p> <p>Pessimistic estimates suggest that Russia might face six-figure numbers of daily new infections, according to Anna Popova, head of Russia's public health agency Rospotrebnadzor.</p> <p>Experts already see indications that the situation with the virus is worsening, Popova added - infection rates in 35 out of more than 80 Russian regions are higher than the country's average.</p> <p>Russia this year has been reporting between 15,000 and 18,000 new infections a day, compared to December's rate of about 30,000 daily cases. The country's state coronavirus task force has registered over 10.6 million confirmed infections and 317,618 deaths overall.</p> <p>Russia's state statistics agency, which uses broader counting criteria, puts the death toll much higher, saying the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 was over 625,000.</p> <p>Health officials have reported only 305 confirmed cases of omicron so far, but Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said there have been cases of community spread. Popova on Tuesday said the variant was registered in 13 Russian regions, including the country's biggest cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.</p> <p>Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said Tuesday that omicron is spreading fast in the Russian capital.</p> <p>"Within 7-10 days, I believe, we will be seeing a significant surge in infections," Sobyanin said, adding that the virus situation in Moscow might become even more "critical" than it was during previous surges.</p> <p>Moscow health officials reported 4,635 new cases of COVID-19 Tuesday, a toll almost twice as high as the previous day. Russia saw 17,525 new infections on Tuesday - up from 15,830 on Monday.</p> <p>Despite the warning signs, no new restrictions were announced and it remained unclear if there are plans to introduce any. Russia had only one nationwide lockdown in 2020, and in October many Russians were ordered to stay off work for a week amid a surge of infections and deaths, but generally, the authorities have resisted shutting down businesses or imposing any tough restrictions.</p> <p>Russian lawmakers late last year introduced legislation restricting access to public places to those who have been vaccinated, recovered or medically exempt from getting a jab, but the law hasn't yet passed all three readings in parliament.</p> <p>Similar restrictions already exist in some Russian regions but are often loosely implemented. In others, they relaxed ahead of the New Year holidays.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Why voting rights under threat?
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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/11/us-voting-rights-explainer-filibuster-republicans-democrats-senate
GIST	<p>The fight over voting rights in the US has arrived at a hugely consequential juncture. After watching Republicans ram through state bills that impose new voting restrictions, Joe Biden and Democrats in the Senate are set to make their most aggressive effort yet to push back.</p> <p>Later this week, the Senate will vote on legislation that would amount to the most significant expansion of voting rights protections since the civil rights era.</p> <p>Here's a look at how the fight over voting rights has unfolded over the last year:</p> <p>Why are voting rights under threat?</p> <p>All of the data from the 2020 election points to it being one of the most successful in American history. About two-thirds of eligible voters – 158 million people – cast a ballot, a record turnout. About a week after the election, a coalition of experts, including a top official in Donald Trump's Department of Homeland Security, described the election as “the most secure in American history”.</p> <p>Nonetheless, Republican state lawmakers fueled an unprecedented surge of legislation to impose new restrictions on voting. In total, more than 440 bills that included measures to restrict voting access were introduced in 49 states in 2021, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. Thirty-four of those bills became law in 19 states.</p> <p>Many of the measures impose restrictions on mail-in voting, which was used in unprecedented numbers in 2020 amid the Covid pandemic.</p> <p>Republicans in Florida and Georgia, for example, limited or prohibited the use of mail-in ballot drop boxes, widely used in 2020 to ensure ballots made it back to election offices in time. Some states also imposed new identification requirements for voters both when they request and return a ballot, despite no evidence of widespread fraud. Lawmakers in Georgia passed measures that prohibit providing food or water to people standing in line to vote.</p> <p>Republicans have also taken up measures to exert control over who runs elections and counts. Election administration in the US has long been seen as a non-partisan job run by under-the-radar officials. But experts are concerned this new trend, which some call election subversion, could lead to partisan meddling.</p> <p>How do Republicans justify what they're doing?</p> <p>Even though voter fraud is virtually non-existent, Republicans say their measures are needed to shore up confidence in elections. Polling shows significant numbers of Americans do not trust the results of the 2020 election. A recent UMass Amherst poll, for example, found that 33% do not believe the election was legitimate.</p> <p>That thinking belies reality. Much of the shaken confidence is because Trump continues to claim without evidence that the election was rigged. The Republican party has embraced his claims, ostracizing dissenters.</p> <p>Republicans also point to polling showing that voter ID is broadly supported, and to record high turnout as evidence voter suppression isn't really a problem. Voting rights groups point out that while turnout was up in 2020, there are still persistent gaps between white and non-white voters. About 70.9% of white voters cast a ballot in 2020, compared with 58.4% of non-white, according to the Brennan Center. In Georgia, lawmakers have defended the ban on providing food and water to people in line by saying it's needed to prevent unlawful electioneering.</p> <p>Will these new laws actually help Republicans?</p> <p>It's not clear that new restrictions will benefit the GOP. A study from March 2021 found that vote-by-mail neither boosted turnout nor helped Democrats. That said, there is still deep concern that</p>

Republicans appear to be pushing restrictions in response to an election where more Americans than ever, including a high numbers of non-white people, cast a ballot.

Republicans could benefit significantly from efforts to take over election administration. Election officials often wield tremendous power to set rules.

What are Democrats doing to push back?

The Democratic response is built around two pieces of federal legislation. One measure is the Freedom to Vote Act, which would overhaul rules for federal elections and set an expansive baseline for voter access. States would be required to offer 15 days of early voting, same-day voter registration and ballot drop boxes, among other measures. It also would prevent the removal without cause of elections officials.

The second bill, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, would restore a key provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, requiring places where there is repeated evidence of recent voting discrimination to get changes to elections approved by the federal government. The US supreme court gutted a similar requirement in 2013.

What is the filibuster and how is it related to all of this?

The [filibuster](#) is a longstanding rule in the Senate. It requires 60 votes to move legislation to a final vote. The Senate is currently split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats but Democrats control it via Vice-President Kamala Harris's casting vote. Because there are not 10 Republicans who support the voting rights bills, Democrats have been unable to move either.

There has been growing criticism of the filibuster from [Democrats](#), who say Republicans have weaponized it into a tool of obstruction.

How can Democrats change the filibuster?

Democrats can change the filibuster with a majority vote. The problem is that two Democrats, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, staunchly support leaving the filibuster in place. They say it is an important way to forge bipartisanship. And they argue that getting rid of the rule would allow Republicans, when back in control, to exert unlimited power.

There have been aggressive negotiations to get both senators to support tweaking but not eliminating the filibuster. Ideas for such changes include requiring senators to actually talk on the floor of the Senate to hold up legislation, or to [require](#) 41 senators to actively show up to block a vote, instead of requiring 60 votes to advance.

Chuck Schumer, the Senate majority leader, has pledged a vote on changes to the filibuster this week. It's unclear what changes, if any, Manchin and Sinema support.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Testing falls short in schools across US
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/us/schools-covid-testing.html
GIST	<p>In California, storms over the winter break destroyed a million coronavirus test kits that were meant to help schools screen returning students. In Seattle schools, children waited for hours for virus testing, some in a driving rain. In Florida this month, an attempt to supply tests to teachers in Broward County turned up expired kits.</p> <p>And in Chicago, a labor dispute, partly over testing, kept students out of school for a week.</p> <p>As millions of American students head back to their desks — Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest school district, started classes on Tuesday — the coronavirus testing that was supposed to help keep classrooms open safely is itself being tested. In much of the country, things are not going well.</p>

Slammed by the ultra-contagious Omicron variant, pressured by political factions, baffled by conflicting federal guidance and hamstrung by a national shortage of rapid-test kits, many districts have struggled to ramp up or effectively establish testing programs. In many areas, schools have already had to close in recent weeks because flawed screenings have allowed infected children and teachers to return to class, putting others at risk.

A vast majority of schools have managed to continue in-person instruction, and in many areas, transmission in classrooms has been lower than in the broader community. But parents' anxieties and confrontations with teachers' unions are jeopardizing the Biden administration's efforts to prevent a return to remote instruction. And even for districts that have working testing programs, high costs are raising questions about their sustainability.

Data from Burbio, a company that audits how schools have operated through the pandemic, shows that more than 5,400 schools have reverted to virtual learning since Jan. 3. The issue, epidemiologists say, is not that testing does not work — particularly in combination with vaccination, face masks and other precautions. Rather, they say, many districts are bungling the execution or failing to muster the resources necessary to test properly.

“A lot of schools are just testing parts of their population once a week, or not using the tests strategically, or confusing surveillance with testing to suppress outbreaks,” said Dr. Michael J. Mina, a former Harvard University epidemiologist and a leading expert on rapid testing who is now the chief science officer for eMed, which authenticates at-home test results.

The result, he said, has been the equivalent of an army going to battle without knowing how to use its weapons or understanding its objectives.

“You can throw all the guns and military personnel you want into a war zone, but if you don't go in with strategy you're never going to win,” Dr. Mina said.

Throughout the pandemic, testing — subsidized with billions of dollars in federal funding — has been viewed as a key way to keep children in classrooms and ease the toll of remote learning on emotional health and academic progress. But public health experts say few districts are testing enough, or strategically enough — particularly in the wake of Omicron.

Screenings meant to detect and isolate outbreaks require broad participation, but many districts have resisted requiring students to take part, fearing political backlash. Many schools also screen with P.C.R. tests, which are useful in diagnosing cases but can open schools to the risk of outbreaks as they wait for results from processing labs.

Newer test-to-stay programs — which let exposed students remain in class as long as they test negative and do not have symptoms — also require intensive testing, but they rely on rapid antigen tests, which are in short supply nationally as soaring Omicron infections have spiked demand.

The lack of clear federal guidance on rapid tests has also been an issue, forcing “every school system to recreate the wheel,” Dr. Mina said.

The result at many schools, health experts say, has been a hodgepodge of half-measures.

“Asking if school testing works is like asking if a dishwasher works — yes, it works, but only if you load the dishes,” said Meagan Fitzpatrick, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine who specializes in infectious disease modeling.

In Seattle, schools canceled classes at the start of last week and held optional pop-up testing events for staff and students, hoping to stave off remote learning by preventing infectious people from entering schools after the holiday break. But only about 14,000 of the district's 50,000 students and 7,800 employees showed up — with about one in 25 testing positive.

By Monday, two schools were closed because of staff shortages and infections, and the district was contemplating a return to remote classes. David Giugliani, a parent of two, said he was grateful for the effort the district was making to protect schools and the community, but also anxious about in-person learning and the uncertainty of it all. Among other issues, he said, was the four-hour wait to be tested, largely indoors, that he and his children had to endure.

“I’d like greater confidence in what’s going to come next, but who has that?” he said.

In Portland, Ore., where Covid-related staff shortages had shut down two of 12 high schools by the end of the first week back to classes, only 27 percent of students have opted in to regular screenings, said Brenda Martinek, chief of student support services. Vaccinated teachers were not offered school-based tests until last week, when staff members in the district office, from secretaries to people in the I.T. department, were trained to administer P.C.R. tests to employees.

“I was in there, too, with my face shield and my mask and gloves, like, ‘OK, swab five times in one nostril, now swab five times in the other,’” she said. “I never thought I was a health care provider, but apparently I am.”

Some Republican-led states have de-emphasized school testing or lagged in distributing stockpiles. In Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis said last week that unless their parents wanted it, children “do not need to be doing any crazy mitigation” such as wearing masks or testing. In Broward County, school employees that had taken advantage of a giveaway of 75,000 tests by the school district discovered that some were past their expiration date.

Even in some large urban districts in heavily Democratic parts of the country, where leaders have vowed to keep schools open, effective testing has been hobbled. New York’s schools announced last week that they were doubling participation in their regular surveillance testing. But union officials noted that even at the expanded level, the optional screenings covered 20 percent of the district’s students at most.

In Chicago schools, fewer than a third of 150,000 re-entry home-test kits mailed out over the winter break were returned by families, and among those that were returned, a majority of the results were invalid. The district, which serves more than 300,000 students, shut down last week as teachers’ unions demanded more aggressive testing.

And in California, weather disrupted an effort over the winter break by Gov. Gavin Newsom to supply the state’s 1,000-plus districts with enough rapid tests to screen all six million-plus K-12 students for re-entry. Of the 10 million rapid tests sent to districts, state health authorities said, a million were destroyed in the rain.

Still, some districts are leaning in.

In Washington, D.C., which serves some 50,000 students, school officials required negative coronavirus tests for every person returning to campus. On Monday, district officials said they would also provide weekly rapid tests to students too young to be vaccinated and add unspecified “test-to-stay” provisions. Most district schools were in-person this week.

And in Los Angeles, which since 2020 has had one of the nation’s most ambitious testing programs, masked parents with masked children in tow lined up for blocks at school sites for much of last week to undergo another free test, this one required for every student and teacher returning to campus.

“I do the swabs by myself now — it just feels like something is tickling my nose with a feather,” said Matthew Prado, 9, standing in line with his mother and little brother outside a school testing clinic in the working-class community of Wilmington near the Port of Los Angeles. “It’s just normal.”

	<p>But the Los Angeles program also underscores the resource intensiveness of effective testing. The Los Angeles Unified School District was among the first in the nation to initiate widespread school-based testing. The initiative — which encompasses more than 600,000 students and staffers — relies on P.C.R. tests provided for about \$12 apiece by SummerBio, a Bay Area start-up. The company, which has devised an automated system to cut costs and speed processing, is contractually obligated to provide overnight results.</p> <p>As classrooms reopened in the fall, the district required all returning students and staff to take a baseline test, then to retest weekly regardless of vaccination status as a condition of in-person instruction. The strategy caught thousands of potential outbreaks and mollified labor concerns over workplace safety.</p> <p>But even at its relatively low cost — the district’s cost per test is about half what the state negotiated for its tests with another vendor — Los Angeles Unified is spending about \$5 million per week on coronavirus testing, said Nick Melvoin, the vice president of the school board.</p> <p>“We were getting ready in November to pull back on testing because of the cost — then Omicron hit,” Mr. Melvoin said, noting that the arrival of vaccines had significantly reduced the number of cases and the risk of severe illness.</p> <p>With more than 400,000 tests logged in the Los Angeles schools by Monday, the Omicron challenge, at least for the short term, was apparent: Nearly 15 percent were positive.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Fewer hospitalizations, shorter stays
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#california-omicron-hospitalizations
GIST	<p>A new study of nearly 70,000 Covid patients in California demonstrates that Omicron causes less severe disease than other coronavirus variants. The new research, posted online Tuesday, aligns with similar findings from South Africa, Britain and Denmark, as well as a host of experiments on animals.</p> <p>Compared with Delta, Omicron infections were half as likely to send people to the hospital. Out of more than 52,000 Omicron patients identified from electronic medical records of Kaiser Permanente of Southern California, a large health system, Dr. Lewnard and his colleagues found that not a single patient went on a ventilator during that time.</p> <p>“It’s truly a viral factor that accounts for reduced severity,” said Joseph Lewnard, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and an author of the study, which has not yet been published in a scientific journal.</p> <p>Despite the less severe virulence of Omicron, U.S. hospitals are buckling under an influx of coronavirus cases. Dr. Lewnard said that this paradox was the result of the variant spreading like wildfire. On average, more than 730,000 people are testing positive every day in the United States, almost three times the previous peak last winter.</p> <p>“Since it’s more transmissible, there will just at some point be a lot of hospitalizations that inevitably occur,” Dr. Lewnard said.</p> <p>In recent weeks, Britain and several other countries have reported that Omicron has a lower risk of hospitalizations. When the variant hit the United States last month, Dr. Lewnard and his colleagues began analyzing electronic health care records maintained by Kaiser Permanente of Southern California, which serves 4.7 million people.</p> <p>They analyzed 69,279 symptomatic patients who tested positive for the coronavirus between Nov. 30 and Jan. 1. Three-quarters of the positive samples contained the Omicron variant, whereas the rest were Delta.</p>

The researchers then followed the people who tested positive to see if they ended up in the hospital. They excluded the so-called incidental Covid patients who showed up at hospitals for other complaints and only tested positive for the coronavirus once they arrived.

Compared with Delta, Omicron cut the risk of hospitalization in half, the study found. What's more, the people who came to the hospital with Omicron stayed for a shorter period. The variant cut hospital stays by more than three days, a reduction of 70 percent compared with Delta.

Fourteen of the Delta-infected patients died, while only one Omicron patient did. That difference translated into a 91 percent reduction in the risk of death.

As scientists have gathered evidence that Omicron is less severe, they've struggled to understand why. One reason is that the people infected with Omicron have more immune defenses than in previous waves.

In other countries, researchers have found that earlier infections with other variants reduce the chances that people end up severely ill with Omicron. Vaccination also offers protection.

"Vaccines are quite helpful," Dr. Lewnard said. He and his colleagues found that Californians who were vaccinated were between 64 and 73 percent less likely to be hospitalized than unvaccinated people were.

Even among unvaccinated people, however, Omicron was less likely to lead to hospitalizations than Delta. Dr. Lewnard said that this extra analysis demonstrated that Omicron is fundamentally less severe. Studies on animals suggest that Omicron readily infects cells in the upper airway, but works poorly in the lungs, which could explain its milder effects.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Top health officials defend federal response
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#us-health-officials-defend-the-administrations-response-to-the-omicron-variant
GIST	<p>Top federal health officials on Tuesday defended the Biden administration's efforts to protect Americans from the highly contagious Omicron variant, facing withering accusations from senators about the scarcity of coronavirus tests and confusing guidance on how soon people who test positive for the virus can return to normal life.</p> <p>In a nearly four-hour hearing, lawmakers charged that the administration remained woefully unable to meet the demand for at-home tests, noting that the White House would fulfill its pledge to send 500 million of them to American households for free only after the current surge had peaked.</p> <p>The health officials testified before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions during one of the most trying weeks yet in the administration's struggle with the pandemic. Infection rates are skyrocketing nationwide, and hospitals set a single-day record on Sunday for the number of patients with the virus, surpassing last winter's peak.</p> <p>While Democratic senators offered only gentle criticism, Republicans were unsparing, claiming that President Biden and his pandemic response team had mangled public health strategy and messaging.</p> <p>"Most Americans can't make heads or tails of anything coming out of this administration," Senator Tommy Tuberville, Republican of Alabama, said.</p> <p>The officials who testified said they had mounted an all-out effort to test, treat and vaccinate Americans in the middle of a shape-shifting pandemic that had suddenly reached a new inflection point with the Omicron variant.</p> <p>"It's hard to process what's actually happening right now, which is, most people are going to get Covid," said Dr. Janet Woodcock, the acting commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, offering one of</p>

the federal government's most pointed acknowledgments of Omicron's impact since the variant arrived in the United States.

"What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function, transportation, you know, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens," she added.

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Mr. Biden's chief medical adviser, said the virus had "fooled everybody all the time, from the time it first came in, to Delta, to now Omicron," adding, "We're doing the best we possibly can."

The hearing came as the Omicron variant, coupled with the Delta variant, has strained hospital systems and caused businesses to struggle to stay open because of staff shortages. An average of more than 735,000 infections are being reported in the United States each day, [according to a New York Times database](#).

On average over the last seven days, more than 135,000 people were hospitalized with the virus, [an 83 percent increase from two weeks ago](#).

Modeling scenarios cited in an internal government document dated Jan. 5 and obtained by The New York Times suggest there will be more than a million confirmed infections per day by the end of the month. That number is widely viewed as a vast undercount because of the scarcity of tests and the widespread failure of people to report positive results from at-home tests to government authorities.

The hearing took a detour early on with a fierce back-and-forth between Dr. Fauci and Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky. The senator accused Dr. Fauci of working to undermine scientists with opposing views on the virus, something Dr. Fauci strongly denied.

Dr. Fauci, his voice raised, said personal attacks from Republicans had put his safety and his family's safety at risk.

After nearly a year of concerted effort to tame the pandemic, Mr. Biden is facing an exhausted public and a new burst of alarming headlines. Asked by reporters on Tuesday whether he was worried about the nation's fight against the virus, the president said that he was "concerned about the pandemic, just because worldwide it's not slowing up very much."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid in Europe: closing window to act
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#as-covid-sweeps-europe-the-who-warns-of-a-closing-window-to-act-now
GIST	<p>More than half of people in Europe could be infected with the Omicron variant of the coronavirus in the next six to eight weeks, the World Health Organization warned on Tuesday, amid "a new west-to-east tidal wave sweeping across the region."</p> <p>"The region saw over seven million cases of Covid-19 in the first week of 2022, more than doubling over a two-week period," Dr. Hans Kluge, the agency's regional director for Europe, said at a news conference.</p> <p>While coronavirus vaccines remain remarkably effective at preventing severe illness and death, the agency cautioned against treating the virus like the seasonal flu, since much remains unknown — particularly regarding the severity of the disease in areas with lower vaccination rates, such as Eastern Europe.</p> <p>The W.H.O. has cautioned for months that booster shots could worsen vaccine inequality around the world, but Dr. Kluge said on Tuesday that they would play an essential role in protecting the most</p>

vulnerable people from severe disease and should also be used to protect health workers and other essential employees, including teachers.

Since Omicron was first detected in late November, it has torn across the planet at a pace unseen during two years of the pandemic. As friends, co-workers and family members test positive, the reality that the virus is moving quickly and widely has been a defining feature of this wave of infection.

But the steep rise that Dr. Kluge cited, based on forecasts by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, is a stark paradigm shift. Although the institute's models have frequently been criticized by experts, it is clear that the virus is spreading quickly. Even if many people avoid severe illness, the virus promises to cause societal disruption across the continent.

While much of the public discussion has revolved around whether this was the moment when governments should shift policies and restrictions to treat the coronavirus as an endemic disease — removing most restrictions and allowing people to manage risk in a way similar to the way they do with influenza — the W.H.O. said it was too early to call this virus endemic.

Catherine Smallwood, a W.H.O. senior emergencies officer, said that one of the key factors in declaring the virus to be endemic was some sense of predictability.

“We are still ways off,” she said. “We still have a huge amount of uncertainty.”

Dr. Kluge added that there were simply too many unknown factors, including exactly how severe Omicron is for unvaccinated people and how high the risk is of infection leading to “long Covid” symptoms.

“I am also deeply concerned that as the variant moves east, we have yet to see its full impact in countries where levels of vaccination uptake are lower, and where we will see more severe disease in the unvaccinated,” he said.

Nations in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, where Omicron is just starting to spread widely, have much lower rates of vaccination than nations in Western Europe.

“For countries not yet hit with the omicron surge, there is a closing window to act now and plan for contingencies,” he said.

One of the central struggles of governments across Europe has been trying to keep schools open, and Dr. Kluge described those efforts as essential.

“Schools should be the last places to close and the first to reopen,” he said, although he added that “the numbers of infected people are going to be so high in many places that schools in many countries are going to be unable to keep all classes open” because of illness and staff shortages.

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HEADLINE	01/11 NYC 'glimmer of hope': new cases level off
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#new-york-hochul-omicron
GIST	<p>A month into the Omicron surge, Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York said on Tuesday that there was a sign of hope on the horizon as the rate of new coronavirus cases in New York City had begun to plateau.</p> <p>Still, she said, with case counts continuing to increase elsewhere in the state and a growing number of hospitals forced to limit elective procedures as a result, it would be premature to declare victory over the current virus wave.</p> <p>“Looks like we may be cresting over that peak,” Ms. Hochul said at her daily news briefing, before clarifying: “Cases are slowing down, the rate of increase is slowing down, but they are still high.”</p>

According to [data compiled by The New York Times](#), the seven-day average of new cases in New York City dipped to 40,150 on Monday from 40,526 on Sunday; statewide, the average fell to 73,815 from 74,182 a day earlier.

“We’re not at the end,” Ms. Hochul said, while calling the latest figures “a glimmer of hope in a time when we desperately need that.”

Other data provided a potentially sobering counterpoint to Ms. Hochul’s optimism. Nearly one in five reported virus tests in New York continue to come back positive, according to state records. Case numbers keep climbing in some neighboring states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut, according a New York Times database.

And even as case numbers in New Jersey show signs of leveling off, Gov. Phil Murphy on Tuesday extended a state of emergency declaration that allows state officials to, among other things, continue to require that masks be worn in schools and at day care centers. (Ms. Hochul previously extended through the end of January New York’s requirement that masks be worn in all public places that do not require vaccination.)

Ms. Hochul also acknowledged that a large swath of New York was not faring as well as New York City. Across the state, 12,540 people were hospitalized with Covid-19 on Monday and 160 died. By comparison, on Friday 11,548 people were hospitalized and 155 died.

“Upstate is continuing to go up, without a doubt,” Ms. Hochul said of the case numbers, adding: “Upstate is about two weeks behind downstate.”

The surge has prompted hospitals across the Finger Lakes, Mohawk Valley and Central New York regions to call off elective surgical procedures — a measure that Ms. Hochul said would remain in effect for the next two weeks.

In another acknowledgment of how fast the Omicron variant continues to spread, the state health commissioner, Dr. Mary T. Bassett, said at the Tuesday briefing that New York would no longer require local health departments to conduct contact tracing on virus cases.

“Omicron is very contagious and has a very short incubation period,” Dr. Bassett said. Because of that, she added, there was “a very short window for intervention to disrupt transmission, which is the purpose of contact tracing.”

The move will allow the state to redirect resources to testing and vaccination efforts, which will do more to fight the virus’s spread, officials said.

Some health departments, like Rockland County’s, had already stopped their tracing efforts as a result of the Omicron-driven spike.

“Due to the recent surge, the Health Department will not be able to reach every Covid-19 positive resident through contact tracing,” Dr. Patricia Schnabel Ruppert, the county’s health commissioner, said in a statement last week. She encouraged residents instead to use self-service forms online and to contact a doctor if they needed medical attention.

Ms. Hochul said individual counties could still conduct contact tracing if they wanted to but they would no longer be obligated to do so. Instead, the state plans to create a website offering guidance to New Yorkers on how to isolate themselves.

“If you’re not feeling well please stay home,” Ms. Hochul said. “Watch some football, watch some whatever you want to watch, but just — just be safe.”

	Asked at the briefing whether she would consider a remote option for state workers, the governor said that all employees should stay home if they felt ill but that she did not think a broad return to remote work was necessary given the widespread availability of testing.
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HEADLINE	01/11 Study: rapid antigen test detects omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#abbott-binaxnow-at-home-covid-test
GIST	<p>The Abbott BinaxNOW, a widely used at-home coronavirus test, can detect the vast majority of people who are infected with the new Omicron variant and are carrying high levels of the virus, according to a new, real-world study of more than 700 people who visited a walk-up testing site in San Francisco.</p> <p>The BinaxNOW is a rapid antigen test, which is designed to detect proteins on the outside of the coronavirus. Like all rapid antigen tests, it is less sensitive than P.C.R. tests, which can find even very small traces of the virus. But rapid antigen tests have generally been good at catching people who have high viral loads and are most likely to be infectious, although federal health officials have recently sent mixed messages about their usefulness.</p> <p>The new study, which has not yet been reviewed by experts, found that overall, the BinaxNOW detected 65 percent of the infections identified via P.C.R. testing, but 95 percent of people who had the highest viral loads. Among those who had high levels of the virus, the tests caught 98 percent of those with symptoms and 90 percent of those without symptoms, the researchers found.</p> <p>The test's performance was roughly on par with what the scientists had observed in prior real-world studies, before Omicron emerged, they said.</p> <p>"It's working as it was designed," said Joseph DeRisi, a biochemist at the University of California, San Francisco, and co-president of the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub and an author of the paper. "There does not seem to be any performance deficit with Omicron."</p> <p>The findings come after some preliminary studies raised questions about whether rapid antigen tests might be less sensitive for Omicron than for other variants — and whether saliva samples might be a better way to detect the variant than the nasal swabs currently used in antigen tests.</p> <p>At a Senate hearing on the federal coronavirus response on Tuesday, Dr. Janet Woodcock, the acting commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, said that scientists were still trying to determine how well the currently authorized at-home tests work for the new variant.</p> <p>"We believe all of them detect Omicron," she said. "We simply feel they are somewhat less sensitive than they were to some of the previous variants."</p> <p>The new research, which relied on nasal swabs, does not address how early in the course of an infection the antigen tests can detect the variant, as one small previous study did, or whether the tests would perform better with saliva samples. And the results cannot be extrapolated to other antigen tests, which need to be evaluated individually, the researchers cautioned.</p> <p>But they suggest that one widely used test — the BinaxNOW — should still be able to pick up most infectious Omicron cases.</p> <p>"This tool continues to be very important," said Dr. Diane Havlir, an infectious disease physician specialist at the University of California, San Francisco, and an author of the paper.</p> <p>The new study was conducted on Jan. 3 and 4 at a free San Francisco testing site. Lab assistants collected two nasal swabs from each of 731 people. The researchers tested one swab from each person with the BinaxNOW test and the other using P.C.R. tests.</p>

	<p>Forty-one percent of those people tested positive for the virus on the P.C.R. tests. When they analyzed a subset of these positive samples, they found that 98.5 percent of them were Omicron.</p> <p>Although the antigen test did miss a small proportion of people carrying high levels of the virus, most of those who tested positive on the P.C.R. test but not on the antigen test had low viral loads, Dr. DeRisi said. They may have been either in the earliest stage of infection or recovering from their infections by the time they were tested.</p> <p>Because the tests may not catch people who have been infected very recently, the researchers recommend that people who are exposed to the virus then test more than once over a period of a few days.</p> <p>“People can be on the upswing of the virus, and we want to make sure those people are detected,” Dr. Havlir said.</p> <p>The study was performed independently of Abbott, she noted, although the company did provide BinaxNOW test kits for a prior study, in 2020. The test kits for the new study were provided by the health department, she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Desperate search for missing in Bronx fire
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/nyregion/bronx-fire-missing-persons.html
GIST	<p>Worshippers at a mosque in the Bronx sat shoeless in small groups along the edge of the carpeted floor.</p> <p>Services were still almost an hour away, but as coffee containers arrived and cups were poured, the imam tried to comfort people caught between anguish and grief.</p> <p>They were all relatives of people still missing more than 24 hours after a fatal fire in a Bronx apartment building that killed 17, including eight children. As many as 12 members of the Masjid-Ur-Rahmah mosque were believed to have died in the fire, the imam, Musa Kabba, said.</p> <p>“We give them the pictures. We give them the names. We give them the phone numbers. We’re still waiting for them to identify them,” Mr. Kabba said.</p> <p>On Tuesday night, the city released a partial list of the deceased. The chaos of the rescue and the striking number of victims complicated the identification process.</p> <p>On Sunday, more than 60 fire victims initially went to four different hospitals in the Bronx. Seventeen of them died within hours, all of the deaths attributed to severe smoke inhalation. About a dozen critically ill patients were stabilized at local hospitals and later transferred to facilities with specialized burn units in Manhattan, Westchester County and other parts of the Bronx.</p> <p>Many survivors were also treated for severe smoke inhalation, which can cause people to become unconscious from lack of oxygen. Not everyone carried identification, and some residents shared similar names to other family members. Multiple members of a single family were close in age, also adding to confusion.</p> <p>Features like tattoos, body jewelry, nail art and scars were used to piece together identities of the deceased, the medical examiner’s office said.</p> <p>The office has used DNA matching to confirm identities by obtaining DNA from relatives and notifying immediate family members after a match has been made, City Hall officials said. The deliberate process has contributed to a lag in releasing the names of the deceased, officials said.</p>

Shivonne Hutson, the city's executive director of forensic investigations, said forensic examiners were also mindful of language and religious differences. Many of the building's residents had relocated to the Bronx from Gambia, a small West African country with a largely Muslim population.

"Observances — these things extend not just in life, but they carry on into death," Ms. Hutson said. Age, too, was a complicating factor: without any identification or little previous medical history, the children posed a particular challenge. "Kids don't have all the records," like fingerprints or dental records, that adults may have, Ms. Hutson said.

After the flames subsided and [the fatal smoke](#) dissipated, a new horror crept in: Other residents, family members and friends were left unsure about the status of loved ones. Hours rolled by, and many people across New York and Gambia spent hours in excruciating limbo, unsure who was alive or dead.

Some families called every hospital in the area, searching for missing relatives. Others visited on foot, desperate for answers.

Aid workers at Monroe College, which is serving as a temporary emergency response center, have been relying on an unofficial list of the dead, injured, missing and displaced, compiled by a local community board member. He has tried to write down the names, contact information and needs of every person who shows up at the college, in an ad hoc intake list.

Gathering information is hard, in part because of language barriers, said Abdoulaye Cisse, a community outreach worker for CAIR-NY, a group that advocates for Muslims. Some residents speak English, but others speak only various combinations of French and the many languages of West Africa.

Fears of immigration authorities linger among some undocumented residents. And some families, he said, are deeply private or are in shock and not ready to talk about their situation.

Dustin Jones watched television footage of the Bronx fire from his apartment in the Chelsea area of Manhattan, frantically calling a friend who he thought lived in the building. Luckily, he was mistaken — she lived a few blocks away — but his relief didn't last long.

He quickly learned he knew two residents of the building: Ramel Thompson, 44, and Dorel Anderson, 38, a couple. The three had met each other through a tight-knit disability community: Mr. Thompson and Ms. Anderson both have cerebral palsy, and Mr. Jones is an advocate of disability rights.

After failing to contact the couple, Mr. Jones and about 100 others, many of them relatives of the couple and members of the disabled community, began a 24-hour search for them, much of it online.

He also knew the couple lived on the 13th floor, and was particularly worried about Ms. Anderson, who uses a wheelchair.

Mr. Jones said he never considered contacting the city for assistance. Instead, he amplified the missing couple on social media, reached out to his media contacts and called friends for information, including a firefighter who had been on the scene. "We live in the age of social media, and I've seen miracles happen," Mr. Jones said.

A relative eventually found the couple at Westchester Medical Center, in Valhalla, N.Y., on Monday, where they were transferred to an advanced burn unit. Ms. Anderson and Mr. Thompson were still being treated; Ms. Anderson's wheelchair was missing.

Breanna Elleston, 27, said she heard her best friend Sera Janneh, 27, was missing on Sunday. Ms. Elleston assumed that Ms. Janneh was in the hospital, unidentified. She called a few close friends and asked them to reach out to her. Their calls went straight to voice mail.

So Ms. Elleston made an Instagram post about her friend, and asked followers to share it, to “see if they knew anybody that worked in nearby hospitals, if they see her face, they could match it up with a picture.” There was still no luck.

Undeterred, Ms. Elleston and some friends planned to put up pictures around the Bronx. When she informed Ms. Janneh’s family of the plan, they told her Ms. Janneh had died.

Mohamed Kamra, too, was working a shift as a taxi driver when he learned that his family was caught in the blaze.

He and a relative frantically tried to locate their entire family. Soon, they found 6-year-old Jabu, 3-year-old Abubakary and baby Ceesay, not yet a year old. But it took hours for Mr. Kamra to locate his wife, Fatoumatia, or his eldest daughter, 8-year-old Mariam.

Christina Kharem, a teacher and special education coach at Mariam’s school, spent her day on the phone with her principal calling hospitals around the city, trying to locate Mariam and her mother, while Mr. Kamra searched in person.

He found Mariam and Fatoumatia by Sunday evening. Each family member was in medically induced comas and on ventilators.

With Mr. Kamra’s permission, Ms. Kharem created an online fund-raiser for the Kamra family around 3 a.m. Monday, asking for donations of both money and supplies. They got their first donation before dawn. By Monday afternoon, Mr. Kamra had visited four of his hospitalized family members and was on his way to see a fifth.

Relieved that he tracked down his family, he remained optimistic on Monday night that they would recover. “For me, right now, it’s no bad memory yet,” he said.

But for some, hope diminished as the hours went by without news.

Yusupha Jawara [told CBS New York](#) that he called 311 more than 40 times trying to learn the fate of his younger brother and sister-in-law, who lived in the building, a block from him.

“We tried all they said,” Mr. Jawara, 47, said in an interview with The New York Times. “Nothing is working for us now.”

He said he understood there were procedures to be followed. “But we need a closure on this to know whether they are alive or dead,” Mr. Jawara said. “That’s all we need. We are not asking for the bodies to be given to us right now. He’s alive or he’s dead. That’s all we need to know.”

At about 4:30 p.m. on Monday, Mr. Jawara texted a reporter that he had received word: His brother and sister-in-law perished in the fire.

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HEADLINE	01/11 How closed door can save lives during fire
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/nyregion/fire-safety-explained.html
GIST	<p>Fire officials say that the lethal smoke that killed 17 people in a Bronx high-rise fire on Sunday probably spread so rapidly because one simple tool for containing just such a blaze failed amid the panic to escape.</p> <p>Mamadou Wague, who lived with his family in the third-floor duplex where the fire broke out, told The New York Post that in his haste, he forgot to close the apartment door behind him. A self-closing mechanism then malfunctioned, clearing a path for smoke to begin filling the 19-story tower.</p>

Here is why fire officials say that closing the door can be one of the most critical actions people can take to stop the spread and save lives when confronting a fire.

Why does closing the door make a difference?

Fires feed on oxygen. Daniel Madrzykowski, a director of research for the Underwriters Laboratories' Fire Safety Research Institute, said that when a door is left open it provides a source of air that ["essentially acts as a pump"](#) fueling the flames.

Closing doors can cut off the pump, slowly starving a fire of much of that fuel. It can also provide one of the most effective barriers to temporarily inhibit the spread of flames and smoke, giving firefighters crucial time to respond.

"Closing the door limits smoke spread and limits the oxygen that is available for combustion," Dr. Madrzykowski said.

Those benefits are why New York requires that apartment doors in any building with three or more units be outfitted with special hinges to close on their own, and why the city encourages residents to close the doors to bedrooms while they sleep.

[A public service announcement](#) produced by the Fire Department and NY1, urging residents to "close the door" in case of fire, [won an Emmy](#) in 2000, the year after a pair of deadly fires in city towers.

Still, problems with open doors have persisted.

The city passed legislation increasing oversight over the doors in 2018, in the aftermath of another residential fire in the Bronx that killed 13 people the previous year. During the fiscal year that ended in June, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development issued 22,000 violations for self-closing doors, 18,000 of which have since been closed as corrected.

So what happened in the Bronx?

City officials said that the fire in the Bronx started with an electrical space heater in a third-floor duplex on Sunday morning. Residents in the unit rushed out, but the self-closing door to the apartment failed to shut behind them.

The open door allowed oxygen to flow in, feeding the growing fire, and allowed thick, heavy smoke to escape into the rest of the building.

Fire officials said they found that the fire had actually barely escaped the apartment before it was put out. (The tower did not have building-wide sprinklers.) But when a door to the stairwell was left open on the 15th floor, it created "a flue effect, like a chimney," a Fire Department spokesman said, rapidly pulling smoke upward.

Residents on higher floors trying to escape [grew sick from smoke inhalation](#), some of them fatally. Others frantically struggled to stop smoke from seeping through the cracks under their doors.

Twin Parks North West

At least 17 people were killed in a fire that began at 11 a.m. on Sunday in an apartment on the building's third floor. Fire department officials said open doors caused smoke to flood the stairwell, possibly preventing residents from escaping.

Jeff Kimble, an assistant professor of fire safety at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, said smoke "behaves like a fluid would," finding its way through small openings and into crevices. But because smoke is hot, lighter than the surrounding air, he added, "it has a propensity to want to rise."

Newer high-rise buildings often have features to reduce the spread of smoke, like stairwells with higher air pressure and dampers that shut down parts of heating and air-conditioning systems. But most older buildings, like the nearly 50-year-old Twin Parks North West, do not.

City officials have not yet said precisely why the apartment door failed to close. Kelly Magee, a spokeswoman for the property owners, said the door had been working properly as of last July, when maintenance workers who came to fix a lock inspected it, and there were no outstanding complaints.

Investigators said the door had not been obstructed, but one official did note that some of the doors to other apartments did not automatically close when marshals tested them after the fire.

There could be several reasons.

Springs or pistons in the closing mechanism can malfunction if they become dirty, worn out or disabled, said Rick Chandler, who was the city buildings commissioner from 2015 to 2019.

Some of the mechanisms are designed to function up to a certain angle, after which the doors may fail to close on their own. For example, a sample of hinges sold online are designed to close when doors are opened up to 94 degrees for one model and 120 for another.

How do I decide whether to flee or stay put?

Deciding whether to stay or go comes down to two critical factors: how close the fire is to your apartment, and whether your building is fireproof.

If the fire is in your apartment, the fire safety rules are unambiguous, regardless of what type of building you live in: Get out of the building, fast, and make sure to close all doors behind you. The New York Fire Department suggests you knock on the doors of your neighbors as you leave, warning them of the blaze.

If the fire isn't in your apartment, deciding whether to stay or go comes down to what type of building you live in. In more modern and legally fireproofed buildings, fires are more likely to be contained, thanks to fireproof building materials and doors that automatically close, sealing off the fire in smaller spaces.

If you live in a fireproof building and the blaze is not in your unit, the Fire Department almost always recommends staying put, sealing off your apartment and calling for help. Depending on where the fire is in your building, trying to escape could be dangerous. Particularly if the blaze is on a lower floor, you risk being caught in smoke filled halls or stairways, given the propensity of smoke and heat to rise.

"We do recommend in high-rise, fireproof buildings that people should shelter in place," the city's fire commissioner, Daniel A. Nigro, said on Monday. "It's safer to be in your apartment than to venture out and try to get down the stairs, and sometimes into a much more dangerous situation."

If you live in a nonfireproof building, regardless of where the fire is, the Fire Department recommends leaving the facility immediately.

What else should I do?

If you've determined the best course of action is to stay in your unit, the Fire Department recommends keeping your doors closed and sealing doorways with duct tape or wet sheets and towels.

As long as the fire is not directly below you, you should crack open a window and let fresh air into your space. Call firefighters, let them know where you are and describe the conditions.

Before any of that, though, the Fire Department strongly encourages residents to familiarize themselves with their building's fire safety plans. Ask your management company what type of building you live in, and what fire safety exit plans are legally required for the complex.

	<p>Every owner of a building with three or more units is legally required to have fire safety plans posted inside every apartment door and to redistribute the plan annually.</p> <p>“Prevention and planning is the key to protecting your family and neighborhoods,” the department’s brief on apartment fire safety says.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Mystery: Putin’s next move on Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/europe/putin-ukraine-russia.html
GIST	<p>GENEVA — President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has spent months massing close to 100,000 troops near the Ukraine border. But Moscow says it has no intention of invading.</p> <p>What is Russia’s next move? No one knows, except perhaps Mr. Putin. And that is by design.</p> <p>The mystery surrounding the Russian leader’s intentions was thick as fog again this week, after a top Russian diplomat delivered a series of seemingly contradictory messages upon emerging from two days of high-stakes security talks with the United States.</p> <p>Moments after declaring the talks “deep” and “concrete,” Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei A. Ryabkov warned that failure to meet Russia’s demands could put the “security of the whole European continent” at risk.</p> <p>The gyrating, often ominous positions helped stump even some of those who make a living from decoding Mr. Putin’s intentions.</p> <p>“The expert opinion that I can authoritatively declare is: Who the heck knows?” Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian foreign-policy analyst who heads a council that advises the Kremlin, said in a telephone interview.</p> <p>Analysts said that not even members of Mr. Putin’s inner circle — let alone Mr. Ryabkov, who led Russia’s delegation at this week’s Geneva talks — were likely to know how seriously Mr. Putin is contemplating full-scale war with Ukraine. Nor would they know what American concessions he is prepared to accept in order to defuse the crisis.</p> <p>Instead, Mr. Putin is likely not even to have made a decision, according to Russian analysts as well as American officials. And he is relishing keeping the West on edge.</p> <p>“What matters is results,” Mr. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, told reporters on Tuesday, maintaining the suspense. “For now, there is nothing to say about any results.”</p> <p>The talks continue on Wednesday, when Russian officials will meet representatives of the United States and its NATO allies in Brussels, and on Thursday at a gathering of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a 57-nation group that includes Ukraine as well as Russia and the United States. After that, Mr. Peskov said, Russia would decide “whether it makes sense” to move forward with diplomacy.</p> <p>Mr. Putin’s brinkmanship of recent months is a case study in his ability to use tension and unpredictability to seek high returns with what may seem like a weak geopolitical hand. Struggling with a stagnant economy and tattered alliances, Russia is also dealing with volatile situations on at least four borders — with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and the Southern Caucasus.</p> <p>For years, Mr. Putin has fumed over NATO’s expansion eastward and American support for pro-Western sentiment in Ukraine; now, by creating a new security crisis that threatens to complicate President Biden’s agenda, he has succeeded in getting the issue to the forefront in Washington.</p>

“For the first time in 30 years, the United States has agreed to discuss issues that it was impossible to discuss even a year ago,” said Tatiana Stanovaya, the founder of a political analysis firm, R.Politik.

Now that the Russian president has Americans at the negotiating table, he is pursuing another classic Putin strategy: putting so many potential moves on the playing field — pointing in so many different directions — that he leaves people guessing, allowing him to choose the tactics that best suit him as events evolve.

Mr. Ryabkov, for instance, told reporters that he was making no ultimatums and foresaw no “deal breaker.” But he added that it was “absolutely mandatory” that the United States guarantee that Ukraine would never join NATO.

He said Russia was imposing no specific timeline, but that it needed a “fast response” to its demands. And while he said there was “no reason to fear an escalation scenario” in Ukraine, he warned that the West still failed to grasp how dangerous it would be to rebuff Russia’s demands.

The contradictory messaging continued on Tuesday when the Kremlin’s spokesman, Mr. Peskov, countered any positive assessments Mr. Ryabkov might have offered the day before. “For now, we do not see any substantive reason for optimism,” he said in his daily conference call with reporters.

The problem with Mr. Putin’s approach is that it gives his diplomats next to no flexibility to negotiate on Russia’s behalf, and sometimes leaves them struggling to maintain a coherent message. Ms. Stanovaya warned that even if diplomats did reach some kind of deal, hawks in Moscow who have more of Mr. Putin’s ear could soon help derail it.

Analysts noted that Mr. Ryabkov, from the diplomatic side, most likely did not even know what military options the Kremlin was considering. The virus-free cocoon Mr. Putin has tried to establish around himself has meant that even confidants are forced to spend days in quarantine before being allowed into the same room with him, further reducing his connections with the outside world.

“No one knows with 100 percent certainty whether Putin is ready for war, or whether this is a bluff or not,” Ms. Stanovaya said.

While Mr. Ryabkov and other Russian officials have denied that Russia plans to invade Ukraine, Mr. Putin himself, at two news conferences in December, did not offer such a denial. Instead, he has warned of an unspecified “military-technical response” if Russia does not get what it wants.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, more than a dozen formerly Communist-ruled countries of Central and Eastern Europe have joined NATO. In 2008, NATO declared that the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine would become members, though there is little chance that they would qualify for years to come.

“We need long-term, legally binding guarantees” that would roll back the NATO presence in Eastern Europe, Mr. Putin said in December. He added that while the United States has exited treaties in the past, “we need at least something, at least a legally binding agreement rather than just verbal assurances.”

While Mr. Putin may have succeeded in getting the U.S. to agree to talk — even though Moscow’s demands appeared to be nonstarters — Ms. Stanovaya and others warned that at this point, talks alone are not enough for him.

Emboldened, he sees Mr. Biden as a man who may be willing to make a deal — and that Mr. Biden, as a veteran of the Cold War, may possess a respect for power diplomacy with Moscow that younger American politicians do not.

	<p>“He assumes that the Americans will pay attention only to that which concretely, immediately threatens them,” Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, said of the Russian president. “He uses unpredictability, he uses tension, he uses threats.”</p> <p>As best analysts can tell, it is the demand that NATO offer some kind of formal assurances not to expand eastward and to cease military cooperation with Ukraine that is now most important for Mr. Putin. The American offer in Monday’s discussions to negotiate missile placement and military exercises in Europe is also of interest to Russia, but Mr. Ryabkov indicated that these issues are a lower priority.</p> <p>NATO has repeatedly ruled out the idea that it would allow any other country to veto who can and cannot be in the alliance, creating what appears to be an impasse. Still, Mr. Lukyanov, the prominent Russian analyst, said the fact that the talks did not immediately collapse means that both sides may see some path — currently invisible to the outside world — to achieve a workable result.</p> <p>As for what Russia does next, Mr. Lukyanov said that this would be solely up to Mr. Putin, who exerts a monopoly on foreign-policy decision-making without recent precedent in Russia. Unlike Soviet-era leaders, Mr. Putin has no “Politburo” of senior officials making collective decisions.</p> <p>Mr. Lukyanov said no individuals could be seen as directly influencing Mr. Putin.</p> <p>“He receives this or that information,” Mr. Lukyanov said. “Those who provide it don’t exert their own influence and don’t know how it’s going to work out.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Fed prepared to raise rates, tame inflation
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/business/powell-confirmation-hearing.html
GIST	<p>Jerome H. Powell, the Federal Reserve chair, told lawmakers on Tuesday that a rapidly healing economy no longer needed as much help from the central bank and that keeping inflation in check — including by raising interest rates — would be critical for enabling a stable expansion that benefited workers.</p> <p>Mr. Powell, whom President Biden recently nominated for a second term as chair, is confronting a complicated economic moment as he moves toward another four-year stint as head of the world’s most powerful central bank. He provided his latest thoughts on the Fed’s challenge during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Banking Committee.</p> <p>The economy is growing swiftly, but it has been buffeted by repeated waves of the coronavirus and by a surge in inflation that has proved stronger and longer lasting than economists expected. Workers are finding jobs and winning wage increases, but the rising costs of housing, gas, food and furniture are pinching shoppers and tanking consumer confidence.</p> <p>The Fed is charged with maintaining price stability, and its officials have recently signaled that they could raise interest rates several times this year to try to cool the economy and prevent rapidly rising prices from becoming permanent. Mr. Powell — who is widely expected to win confirmation — reiterated that commitment on Tuesday.</p> <p>“If we see inflation persisting at high levels longer than expected, if we have to raise interest rates more over time, we will,” Mr. Powell said.</p> <p>But the central bank also has a second mandate: It is supposed to guide the economy toward full employment, a situation in which people who want to work and are able to do so can find jobs. Cooling off the economy can slow hiring, so trying to foster a strong labor market and trying to set the stage for a strong labor market can require a balancing act for policymakers.</p> <p>Mr. Powell squared the two goals in his testimony, suggesting that keeping price gains under control would be critical for achieving a sustainably strong labor market.</p>

“High inflation is a severe threat to the achievement of maximum employment,” he said.

If rapid price gains start to become “entrenched in our economy,” the Fed might have to react starkly to choke off runaway inflation and risk touching off a recession, Mr. Powell said. To avoid a painful policy response and instead set the stage for a strong future labor market, he added, it is important to control inflation.

“If inflation does become too persistent, if these high levels of inflation get entrenched in our economy, and in people’s thinking, then inevitably that will lead to much tighter monetary policy from us, and it could lead to a recession, and that would be bad for workers,” Mr. Powell said.

Economists increasingly expect Fed officials to make three or four interest rate increases in 2022, moves that would make borrowing expensive for households and businesses and slow down spending and growth. That could, in turn, weaken hiring, keep wages from growing as swiftly and hold down prices over time as people shop less.

The Fed’s rate increases would come on top of other moves intended to keep the economy from overheating: Officials are slowing down the big bond purchases they had been using to lower longer-term interest rates and stoke growth, and policymakers have signaled that they may begin to shrink their bond holdings this year.

They could do that passively, allowing bonds to mature without reinvesting, or they could sell assets. Mr. Powell left the door open to either possibility on Tuesday. If the Fed trims those balance sheet holdings, that will reinforce the move higher in interest rates, cooling the economy further.

“The committee hasn’t made any decisions about the timing of any of that — I think we’re going to have to be both humble and a bit nimble,” Mr. Powell said.

He noted that all members of the Fed’s policy-setting committee expected to raise interest rates this year, but the number of increases will depend on how the economy evolves. Officials have made clear that higher borrowing costs could come soon.

Loretta Mester, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland and an official who has traditionally favored more interest rate increases than many of her colleagues, [said on Bloomberg Television on Tuesday](#) that she would favor beginning rate increases in March and that she expected three moves this year. Raphael Bostic, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, also indicated [in an interview with Reuters](#) that a March policy rate change could be appropriate.

The prospect of rising interest rates has unnerved stock investors lately. Higher rates discourage risky investments like stocks, and can curb corporate profit growth. Wall Street’s major benchmarks moved between losses and gains on Tuesday as Mr. Powell spoke.

The Fed’s recent and decisive move toward inflation-fighting mode could be shored up by an [inflation report](#), slated for release on Wednesday, that is expected to show the fastest growth in consumer prices since June 1982.

Mr. Powell emphasized that inflation has been high both because consumer demand for goods has been strong and because supplies of goods and services have been seriously disrupted: The pandemic has shut down factories, shipping routes haven’t been able to keep up as consumers buy more imported goods, and companies have in some cases struggled to hire workers to expand production and services.

The Fed can help to cool demand with its tools, but it is also hoping that supply bounces back as companies learn to live with the new backdrop the pandemic has created, Mr. Powell said.

Keeping inflation under control is “going to require us to use our tools, to the extent that they work on the demand side, while we also expect some help from the supply side,” he said.

Still, predicting the trajectory for inflation has been a fraught task during the pandemic. The Fed had initially forecast that inflation would pop early in 2021 and then fade, but policymakers — like many private sector forecasters — got that wrong.

“We’re not really seeing, yet, the kind of progress essentially all forecasters really thought we’d be seeing by now,” Mr. Powell said, at least when it comes to snarled supply chains.

“People want to buy cars — carmakers can’t make any more cars, because there are no semiconductors,” he said, emphasizing what an unusual period the pandemic has been. “That’s never happened.”

Some Republicans, including Senator Patrick J. Toomey of Pennsylvania, worried that the Fed might have moved too slowly to counteract price gains in part because of a new, employment-focused policy approach Mr. Powell ushered in.

“I worry that the Fed’s new monetary policy framework has caused it to be behind the curve,” Mr. Toomey said. But he then praised the Fed for adjusting its stance as conditions have evolved and as inflation has shown signs of sticking around.

Investors do not seem to share the concern that the central bank will be unable to wrestle the situation back under control, said Subadra Rajappa, head of U.S. rates strategy at Societe Generale. She noted that [inflation expectations priced](#) into financial assets had been stable, as investors looked for about four rate increases this year.

Markets “at least believe they are going to be able to raise rates and curb the risk of runaway inflation,” she said.

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HEADLINE	01/11 United Airlines: 4% employees test positive
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/business/omicron-united-airlines-flights-canceled.html
GIST	<p>In a single day over the holidays, nearly one in three United Airlines employees called in sick at Newark Liberty International Airport, a major hub for the airline, the company’s chief executive said on Tuesday.</p> <p>The revelation, which came in a memo to staff from the airline’s chief executive, Scott Kirby, helps explain why U.S. airlines have had to cancel more than more than 27,000 flights, or about 8 percent of all scheduled trips, over two weeks starting the day before Christmas, according to FlightAware, a data tracking service. Employees calling in sick and storms that delivered strong winds, rains and in some cases record snowfall at airports nationwide wreaked havoc on United and other companies and stranded many travelers.</p> <p>Overall, about 3,000 United Airlines employees — more than 4 percent of its work force — have recently tested positive for the coronavirus, Mr. Kirby said in his memo. The vast majority are not working, and United is cutting its flight schedule to manage the shortage.</p> <p>“Our frontline teams continue to put in a tremendous effort during what I know is an incredibly challenging and stressful time — the Omicron surge has put a strain on our operation, resulting in customer disruptions during a busy holiday season,” he said.</p> <p>In the two-week period starting just before Christmas, United canceled more than 2,500 flights. SkyWest Airlines, which operates shorter flights for major carriers including United, canceled more than 4,600 trips over that period, more than any other airline. Southwest Airlines was close behind with more than 4,000 flights.</p>

	<p>United was one of the first major companies in the United States to impose a vaccine mandate, with nearly all of its workers now vaccinated. Mr. Kirby said that the policy was working.</p> <p>No vaccinated employees are hospitalized and the hospitalization rate among United employees since the mandate went into effect in the fall has been far lower than that of the general population, he said. Before the requirement, more than one United employee died each week from the virus, on average, Mr. Kirby said. The airline has gone eight weeks without a single virus-related death among vaccinated employees.</p> <p>“In dealing with Covid, zero is the word that matters — zero deaths and zero hospitalizations for vaccinated employees,” he said. “And while I know that some people still disagree with our policy, United is proving that requiring the vaccine is the right thing to do because it saves lives.”</p> <p>The flight cancellations have continued into this week as airlines preemptively adjust schedules to manage fallout from the holiday disruptions and staffing problems, though the number has fallen steadily in recent days. More than 650 flights on Tuesday were canceled, about 150 of them operated by United.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 World Bank: Covid slows economic growth
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/business/world-bank-2022-growth.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The World Bank said on Tuesday that the pace of global economic growth was expected to slow in 2022, as new waves of the pandemic collide with rising prices and snarled supply chains, blunting the momentum of last year’s recovery.</p> <p>This projection underscores the stubborn nature of the public health crisis, which is widening inequality around the world. The pandemic is taking an especially brutal toll on developing countries, largely owing to rickety health care infrastructure and low vaccination rates.</p> <p>“The Covid-19 crisis wiped out years of progress in poverty reduction,” David Malpass, the World Bank president, wrote in an introduction to the report. “As government’s fiscal space has narrowed, many households in developing countries have suffered severe employment and earning losses — with women, the unskilled and informal workers hit the hardest.”</p> <p>Global growth is expected to slow to 4.1 percent this year, from 5.5 percent in 2021, according to the World Bank. Output is expected to be weaker, and inflation is likely to be hotter than previously thought.</p> <p>The World Bank said growth rates in most emerging markets and developing economies outside East Asia and the Pacific would return to their prepandemic levels, still falling short of what would be needed to recoup losses during the pandemic’s first two years. The slowdown in these regions will be more abrupt than what advanced economies will experience, leading to what the World Bank describes as “substantial scarring” to output.</p> <p>Income inequality is widening both within and between countries, the World Bank said, and could become entrenched if disruptions to education systems persist and if high national debt hinders the ability of nations to support their low-income populations. Globally, the prospect of higher interest rates and withdrawal of fiscal support could take a toll on low-income countries while they are already vulnerable.</p> <p>Growth in the world’s two largest economies, the United States and China, is poised to moderate considerably. The World Bank said that the recently passed infrastructure law would do little to buttress growth in the United States in the near term and that pandemic restrictions were curbing consumer spending and residential investment in China.</p> <p>The World Bank is recommending stronger debt relief initiatives to help poor countries as well as urging support for policies that will strengthen their financial systems and improve local infrastructure</p>

	<p>in ways that will spur growth. Easing global supply chain bottlenecks, particularly for Covid vaccine doses, will be crucial.</p> <p>“At the start of 2022 the supply of vaccines is increasing appreciably, but new variants and vaccine deployment bottlenecks remain major obstacles,” Mr. Malpass said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Audit: U visa program riddled w/fraud
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/11/audit-finds-program-give-visas-illegal-immigrant-c/
GIST	<p>Homeland Security’s special visa program to grant legal status to victims of crime is plagued by fraud and mismanagement, according to a new inspector general’s audit released this week that found the department doesn’t even know how many of the visas are issued.</p> <p>The review cited evidence that some immigrants were faking crimes to get the visa, which is one of the few concrete ways an illegal immigrant can get on a pathway to citizenship.</p> <p>Known as the U visas, the program is supposed to help victims, giving them permission to remain in the U.S. and assist police in solving their crimes. Police are supposed to certify that someone was a victim and is helping the investigation, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services can then issue a visa.</p> <p>But the inspector general found immigrants were forging police certifications or obtaining real certifications and altering them to try to advance their cases by making the crimes seem more serious.</p> <p>USCIS doesn’t track fraud case outcomes, so it can’t say how many people who filed bogus applications were prosecuted. And the agency can’t say how much the victims actually help police, the audit found.</p> <p>The inspector general said USCIS ignored repeated warnings over the last decade to fix the problem.</p> <p>One 2018 internal review said the agency had “grave concerns” about any certification filed after 2016 because many police agencies, under threat of lawsuits, “just sign” certifications without actually checking what’s in them.</p> <p>That same review also found police were “selling” bogus certifications.</p> <p>Another internal review in 2020 looked at nearly 600 U visa cases and found in two-thirds, police had already completed their case by the time the victim sought certification, meaning the victim’s help was no longer needed. In some instances, the police weren’t even sure a crime had been committed but signed a certification anyway.</p> <p>“Without addressing these issues, USCIS cannot ensure the U visa program is operating as intended, providing protection to victims of serious crimes and strengthening law enforcement’s ability to detect, investigate and prosecute serious crimes, such as torture, rape and domestic violence,” Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari concluded.</p> <p>USCIS Director Ur Jaddou fired back in a fervent 21-page reply to a draft of the report, saying the inspector general botched the audit with “basic legal errors” and a misunderstanding of the point of the U visa.</p> <p>She said nearly 60% of U visa cases result in arrest, indictment or prosecution of a criminal.</p> <p>Besides, she said, the audit treated the program as chiefly a means to help police, but U visas have a second, equally important purpose of helping victims of crime. Ms. Jaddou said immigrants should be able to get visas regardless of whether they are playing a direct active role in the investigation or prosecution of a crime.</p>

That also creates a more open environment for immigrants to report crimes, she said.

“The U visa program is a critical tool that helps law enforcement detect, investigate, and prosecute serious crimes by providing protection to noncitizen crime victims who are important case witnesses,” the agency said in a statement this week.

In an earlier draft report the inspector general had concluded that USCIS “did not assist law enforcement,” but Mr. Cuffari said that was changed in response to Ms. Jaddou’s criticism.

He also acceded to Ms. Jaddou’s criticism that the program has dual intents, and he nixed one of his policy recommendations concerning that issue.

The U visa program was created by Congress in 2000. USCIS began issuing passes in 2008.

The program is limited to 10,000 visas a year, with thousands more family members allowed as derivatives. It draws many times more applications than the cap allows.

As of Sept. 30, there were nearly 285,000 pending U visa cases. At the rate USCIS is working right now, it would take 16 years just to clear that backlog, without accounting for new cases.

A U visa grants the holder a work permit, which is the golden ticket for illegal immigrants, not only allowing them to avoid deportation but giving them a legal right to work and access to some taxpayer benefits. That makes the program very attractive — and a target for fraud.

A key vulnerability is that the program asks immigrants to get certifications from the police then submit them, rather than having the police send the certifications directly to Homeland Security. That creates opportunities for mischief.

Another problem is police signing off on certifications without really knowing whether a crime did occur.

Federal prosecutors in Minnesota in 2020 charged a woman with orchestrating a scheme to have immigrants report false crimes and corroborate each other’s stories to obtain U visas.

And in Indiana, a lawyer pleaded guilty in 2017 to visa fraud after authorities said he filed more than 200 bogus U visa cases, fabricating claims that the migrants had provided help to the U.S. attorney’s office. The lawyer charged the migrants about \$3,000 each.

The inspector general, in this week’s report, found 10 instances where a U visa applicant either forged a law enforcement official’s signature or altered a document after it was signed.

But the most damning evidence came from within USCIS itself and the multiple internal reviews that found problems including “police officials selling fraudulent [certifications] with false police reports” or applications where people substituted pages from legitimate certifications into bogus applications.

“We have grave concerns about the reliability of the certification from 2016 on as the threat of lawsuits has forced many law enforcement agencies to just sign and not question the certification,” USCIS’s Center Fraud Detection Operations said in one internal report.

This week’s audit suggested five changes to USCIS’s handling of the U visa, including improved data collection, tracking the outcomes of fraud cases turned over to other authorities, make life easier for those in the backlog, coming up with yardsticks to better measure the program’s success and implementing stiffer fraud controls. One concrete suggestion was to have police submit their crime certifications directly to USCIS.

	<p>Ms. Jaddou agreed with the recommendations about data collection, yardsticks and improving conditions for those in the backlog. USCIS has already moved on that last recommendation by making work authorization documents available earlier to people in the backlog.</p> <p>But Ms. Jaddou rejected suggestions to do more to spot fraud and track fraud referrals.</p> <p>She said the agency “already has a robust set of controls in place” to stop fraudulent documents. And she said it wasn’t worth the agency’s time to issue new regulations to allow police to submit certifications directly, given that she disputed the fraud findings themselves.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid in air loses 90% ability infect 5min.
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/11/covid-loses-90-of-ability-to-infect-within-five-minutes-in-air-study
GIST	<p>Coronavirus loses 90% of its ability to infect us within five minutes of becoming airborne, the world’s first simulations of how the virus survives in exhaled air suggest.</p> <p>The findings re-emphasise the importance of short-range Covid transmission, with physical distancing and mask-wearing likely to be the most effective means of preventing infection. Ventilation, though still worthwhile, is likely to have a lesser impact.</p> <p>“People have been focused on poorly ventilated spaces and thinking about airborne transmission over metres or across a room. I’m not saying that doesn’t happen, but I think still the greatest risk of exposure is when you’re close to someone,” said Prof Jonathan Reid, director of the University of Bristol’s Aerosol Research Centre and the study’s lead author.</p> <p>“When you move further away, not only is the aerosol diluted down, there’s also less infectious virus because the virus has lost infectivity [as a result of time].”</p> <p>Until now, our assumptions about how long the virus survives in tiny airborne droplets have been based on studies that involved spraying virus into sealed vessels called Goldberg drums, which rotate to keep the droplets airborne. Using this method, US researchers found that infectious virus could still be detected after three hours. Yet such experiments do not accurately replicate what happens when we cough or breathe.</p> <p>Instead, researchers from the University of Bristol developed apparatus that allowed them to generate any number of tiny, virus-containing particles and gently levitate them between two electric rings for anywhere between five seconds to 20 minutes, while tightly controlling the temperature, humidity and UV light intensity of their surroundings. “This is the first time anyone has been able to actually simulate what happens to the aerosol during the exhalation process,” Reid said.</p> <p>The study, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, suggested that as the viral particles leave the relatively moist and carbon dioxide-rich conditions of the lungs, they rapidly lose water and dry out, while the transition to lower levels of carbon dioxide is associated with a rapid increase in pH. Both of these factors disrupt the virus’s ability to infect human cells, but the speed at which the particles dry out varies according to the relative humidity of the surrounding air.</p> <p>When this was lower than 50% – similar to the relatively dry air found in many offices – the virus had lost half of its infectivity within 10 seconds, after which the decline was slower and more steady. At 90% humidity – roughly equivalent to a steam or shower room – the decline in infectivity was more gradual, with 52% of particles remaining infectious after five minutes, dropping to about 10% after 20 minutes.</p> <p>However, the temperature of the air made no difference to viral infectivity, contradicting the widely held belief that viral transmission is lower during warm weather.</p>

	<p>“It means that if I’m meeting friends for lunch in a pub today, the primary [risk] is likely to be me transmitting it to my friends, or my friends transmitting it to me, rather than it being transmitted from someone on the other side of the room,” said Reid. This highlights the importance of wearing a mask in situations where people cannot physically distance, he added.</p> <p>The findings support what epidemiologists have been observing on the ground, said Dr Julian Tang, a clinical virologist at the University of Leicester, adding that “masks are very effective ... as well as social distancing. Improved ventilation will also help – particularly if this is close to the source.”</p> <p>Dr Stephen Griffin, associate professor of virology at the University of Leeds, emphasized the importance of ventilation, saying: “Aerosols will fill up indoor spaces rapidly in the absence of proper ventilation, so assuming the infected individual remains within the room, the levels of virus will be replenished.”</p> <p>The same effects were seen across all three Sars-CoV-2 variants the team has tested so far, including Alpha. They hopes to start experiments with the Omicron variant in the coming weeks.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Surging Covid shakes up return office plans
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/surging-covid-19-puts-an-end-to-projected-return-to-office-dates-11641906003?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>If businesses have learned one thing from Covid-19, it is to stop trying to predict when they are going to be back in the office.</p> <p>Companies across the U.S. said they were returning to the workplace in September, only to put off those plans when the spread of the Delta variant accelerated. Many of those same firms were poised to dust off their office desks in January. Now major banks, technology companies and other firms have scrapped those plans thanks to the Omicron variant, and a sense that Covid-19 is going to linger longer than most first imagined.</p> <p>The postponements have unnerved office landlords and small businesses that are being stretched thin by a dearth of demand in office districts. An average of only 28% of the workforce last week returned to the office in the 10 major cities monitored by Kastle Systems, a nationwide security company that monitors access-card swipes. That compares with more than 40% the first week in December.</p> <p>These reversals have persuaded many business leaders to avoid specific return dates. Instead, they are adopting more nuanced workplace strategies that recognize that Covid-19 will be around for the indefinite future.</p> <p>Those plans, which are still being crafted at many companies, will mean adjusting the use of conventional office space depending on need and health conditions. For example, rather than devising an officewide return date, companies are working on systems that would vary the number of employees in offices depending on the Covid-19 infection rate for the indefinite future, human-resources executives say.</p> <p>Some businesses also are working on strategies that would base office returns on the needs of specific groups, these executives say. Under this system, managers would ask employees who are working on a sales or marketing presentation to gather in offices to collaborate, and then return to mostly working at home when it is finished.</p> <p>The decision by companies to give up on the idea of companywide return dates amounts to more bad news for office landlords, because the change will likely prolong the length of time that people work from home.</p> <p>“The longer people have worked remotely, the harder it will be to get them back to the office,” said Kathryn Wylde, chief executive of the Partnership for New York City, a business group.</p>

Some companies modified their workplace strategies even before Omicron hit in late November. Earlier in the fall, law firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP told employees that they would get three weeks notice before offices were reopened rather than a return date in the distant future.

“Our flexible and adaptable approach continues to serve us well,” a spokesman for the firm said last week.

Brian Kropp, chief of human-resources research for the advisory and research firm Gartner, said he sees evidence of this new approach in the hundreds of conversations a week his firm has globally with business executives involved in pandemic planning.

“It’s no longer, we’ve got a virus or we don’t have a virus,” he said. “They’re shifting their mind-set to say: We’re going to create a set of conditions and those sets of conditions will determine how many people are allowed in the office at any point in time.”

About one-third of companies that responded to a Gartner survey in late December said they were either sending workers home, delaying reopenings or reducing the number of employees in their offices.

Building and deflating expectations can hurt employee morale and a company’s reputation even though planners have no way of knowing the course of the pandemic, Mr. Kropp said. Companies that keep changing their minds “have egg on their faces,” he said. “They don’t want to keep making promises that they fail to deliver.”

Even big banks that have been the most aggressive in returning to offices sent their workers home after the holidays. [Goldman Sachs Group](#) Inc., which reopened its offices to employees in June, after the holidays [encouraged them to stay home](#), at least until Jan. 18.

Wells Fargo & Co., which delayed return dates in September and October, had been planning to open its offices on Monday, but canceled that as well. The company in December said it would announce new plans in the new year.

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HEADLINE	01/11 China lockdowns shutter factories, ports
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-covid-19-lockdowns-hit-factories-ports-in-latest-knock-to-supply-chains-11641918247?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>HONG KONG—With Covid-19 flaring up across China, major manufacturers are shutting factories, ports are clogging up and workers are in short supply as officials impose city lockdowns and mass testing on a scale unseen in nearly two years.</p> <p>The prospect of continued disruptions in the world’s second-largest economy, which has a zero-tolerance strategy for combating the pandemic, is heightening fears that the disruptions will ripple through the global economy. Already, companies including memory-chip maker Samsung Electronics Co., German auto maker Volkswagen AG and a textiles company that supplies Nike Inc. and Adidas AG are suffering production hitches.</p> <p>Since late December, officials have taken measures to counter Covid-19 outbreaks in several Chinese cities, including the eastern port of Tianjin, Xi’an in central China, and the southern technology hub of Shenzhen. The world’s third-busiest container port of Ningbo-Zhoushan, near Shanghai, risks worsening backlogs from restrictions on trucks and warehouse operations after more than two dozen Covid-19 cases were confirmed in the surrounding area.</p> <p>Chinese authorities are adhering to the same playbook that successfully curtailed initial outbreaks of the pandemic and caused intermittent disruptions to production and supply chains.</p>

The potential consequences are more severe this time, economists warn, because of [the highly contagious nature of Omicron](#), which has been detected in some areas of China. The variant is hitting the country as Beijing seeks to contain outbreaks ahead of the Winter Olympics, which are set to begin on Feb. 4.

“The risk posed by the Omicron variant is that we could take a huge step back in terms of supply-chain bottlenecks,” said Frederic Neumann, co-head of Asian Economics Research at [HSBC](#). “This time, the situation could be even more challenging than last year given China’s increasingly significant role in global supply.”

Several economists said China may escalate its containment policy and some have touted the possibility of a nationwide lockdown, unseen since April 2020. Goldman Sachs on Tuesday cut China’s 2022 growth forecast to 4.3% from 4.8% in light of the latest Covid-19 developments.

Toyota Motor Corp. said operations on Monday and Tuesday at its joint-venture factory in Tianjin came to a halt because of mass testing requirements imposed across the city. About 14 million residents in Tianjin, an industrial hub in northeastern China that accounts for 1.7% of China’s exports, were tested after two cases of the Omicron variant were detected.

A Volkswagen plant based in the city was also closed, Stephan Wöllenstein, the auto maker’s China chief executive, said Tuesday. The German car maker recently also closed a plant in Ningbo, a port city in eastern China, after another small Covid-19 outbreak, he said.

Mr. Wöllenstein added that in many cases, Chinese authorities have brought local outbreaks under control in a few weeks, allowing businesses to restart operations.

“We are monitoring very carefully what’s happening over there because Omicron has the potential to significantly change the picture in China compared to 2020 and 2021,” Guillaume Faury, CEO of Airbus SE, the world’s largest plane manufacturer, said during a conference call Monday. He said so far there haven’t been any supply disruptions in the country, including in Tianjin, where the company runs a final assembly line that produces aircraft including the A320 single-aisle passenger plane.

Western consumers and retailers have become more dependent on China since the start of the pandemic for products from bikes to laptops, and China’s trade surplus is expected to have hit a record high, by value, in 2021. The risk is that “over the coming months we’ll experience the ‘mother of all supply chain’ stumbles: an Omicron-driven stall in factory Asia,” said Mr. Neumann.

Two of the world’s largest memory-chip makers have experienced problems in Xi’an, a central Chinese city where the local government [put in place strict pandemic restrictions](#) starting Dec. 23. South Korea-based Samsung Electronics is having trouble getting enough employees where they are needed because of the city’s restrictions on residents leaving home, according to people familiar with the matter. That might cause a slight decline in output in the short term, they said.

A Samsung spokeswoman referred to an earlier statement saying the company would take all necessary measures to ensure that customers aren’t affected by what it described as an adjustment to its Xi’an operations.

U.S.-based [Micron Technology](#) Inc. said in late December the lockdown in Xi’an had reduced its workforce at its site in the city, affecting output of its DRAM memory-chip products.

In Ningbo, [Shenzhou International Group](#), a supplier to global sports brands including Nike, Adidas and [Fast Retailing](#) Co.’s Uniqlo, said some production sites were locked down from Jan. 3 after 10 cases were detected in Ningbo’s Beilun district. As of Monday, part of the production has resumed operations, it said.

Employees of [Foxconn Technology Group](#), a supplier to [Apple](#) Inc., and Huawei Technologies Co. were among workers who took Covid-19 tests in southern Shenzhen, according to the companies.

Business executives and industry analysts expect further disruptions could rattle China's manufacturers and ports as new outbreaks emerge.

This week, more than five million people living in China's central city of Anyang entered a citywide lockdown after more than 80 cases were confirmed locally, including two Omicron cases. In Henan's capital city Zhengzhou, where many of the world's iPhones are assembled by Foxconn, the local government required all residents of the city to undergo Covid-19 tests.

If the Omicron variant spreads across Asia more widely after sweeping through the U.S. and Europe, economists say it could [add to rising inflation](#) and potentially prompt central banks such as the Federal Reserve to accelerate tightening of monetary policy.

Within China, the economic risks of sticking with strict Covid-19-related restrictions are growing.

A week's delay of essential trade at the Ningbo port, about 685 miles south of Tianjin, could affect trade valued at \$4 billion, including the exporting of \$236 million in integrated circuit boards and \$125 million in clothing, according to a study by the Russell Group, a supply-chain consulting firm. A container terminal at the Ningbo port was shut down for two weeks in August after a single case was detected.

In Nantong, a city in China's eastern Jiangsu province, Mei Wenlong, owner of an electrical-equipment factory, said Omicron-related disruptions could spill over to his suppliers in coming weeks. His factory, with 40-plus employees, was among those in the region hit by [a temporary power crunch last fall](#).

"Omicron hasn't affected us much but they could come sooner than expected," said Mr. Mei. "There's not much you can do. We'll learn to deal with it when it comes."

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HEADLINE	01/12 Inflation on track fastest pace since 1982
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-inflation-consumer-price-index-december-2021-11641940760
GIST	<p>U.S. inflation is on track to have closed out 2021 near its highest level since 1982 as robust consumer demand exacerbated pandemic-related supply shortages.</p> <p>Economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal estimate the Labor Department's consumer-price index—which measures what consumers pay for goods and services—rose 7.1% in December from the same month a year earlier, up from 6.8% in November. That would mark the fastest pace since 1982 and the third straight month in which inflation exceeded 6%.</p> <p>They also estimate that the so-called core price index, which excludes the often-volatile categories of food and energy, rose 5.4% in December from a year earlier. That would be a sharper increase than November's 4.9% rise, and the highest rate since 1991.</p> <p>On a monthly basis, the CPI likely climbed a seasonally adjusted 0.5% in December from the preceding month, decelerating slightly from October and November.</p> <p>"There's still a lot of scarcity in the economy. Consumers and businesses are in great financial shape, and they're willing to pay up for more goods, more services and more labor," said Sarah House, director and senior economist at Wells Fargo, pointing to reasons for the "blistering pace of inflation."</p> <p>Prices for autos and other durable goods continue to drive much of the inflationary surge, fueled by largely pandemic-related imbalances of supply and demand that most economists expect to fade as Covid-19's impact on economic activity eases.</p> <p>Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell in congressional testimony Tuesday said he was optimistic supply-chain issues would ease this year and help bring inflation down.</p>

The December inflation data also will reflect the initial impact of the Omicron variant, which is posing [a new threat to the economy](#) as the pandemic enters its third year.

Omicron weighed on prices for travel, recreation and other in-person services, though seasonal pricing trends are contributing as well, said Omair Sharif, founder of Inflation Insights LLC.

Gains in energy prices—which had been driven by pandemic-related disruptions as well as by weather and geopolitical factors—have shown signs of flagging, with prices at the pump edging down in December. However, food inflation remains elevated.

The December employment report signaled continued tightening of the job market, with the [unemployment rate dropping to 3.9%](#) from 4.2% in November, the Labor Department said. Average hourly wages rose 4.7% in December from a year earlier, well above the roughly 3% average increase before the pandemic.

This in part reflects a crucial supply constraint: the pool of workers, particularly for lower-paid work such as in food services.

“We’re seeing people re-sorting themselves into jobs they’re better suited to or that they prefer. So the wage increases we’re seeing are concentrated in the bottom quintile,” said Constance Hunter, chief economist at KPMG. “Overall, this is good for the economy. But it does help some of that upward price pressure persist.”

Wage increases are contributing increasingly to high inflation because they support higher spending, but also because they raise costs for businesses. Many companies plan to pass on higher labor and materials costs to consumers.

In December, some 49% of small businesses said they planned to raise prices in the next three months, on net, according to the National Federation of Independent Business, a trade association. That figure is down slightly from October and November, but close to the highest share since monthly records began in 1986.

Omicron’s uniquely rapid spread has worsened the labor shortage by driving up workplace absences. Manufacturing companies are adopting [expensive solutions to keep factories running](#) so they can meet booming demand. [FedEx Corp.](#) said this week that Omicron [is causing staffing shortages and delaying shipments](#).

John Merritt, vice president of Elaine Bell Catering in Napa, Calif., said staffing was an immediate issue when demand for weddings and other big events came surging back last June. The company raised wages 50% in a bid to retain workers and hire new ones, but still had to rely on the services of temp agencies.

Due to increased labor costs—along with soaring prices for meat, cheese and wheat-based products—the company didn’t make a profit last year, he said.

“People frequently say [restaurant and catering workers] are low-price people. Well, our base pay is now \$30 an hour for wait staff and we still can’t fill positions,” he said. “This is going to be an ongoing problem. If we want to have the quality staff for the kinds of events that we do, we know we need to pay for it or we aren’t going to get them.”

The caterer has raised prices for the coming year by 25% to 35% from pre-pandemic rates. So far, customers are accepting the increases. “We’ve never raised prices that much from one year to the next. But we’ve never had cost increases like this either,” said Mr. Merritt.

Demand for autos, furniture and other goods has boomed during the pandemic, straining supply chains and fueling much of the inflation surge. The most prominent example is a shortage of semiconductors that has hamstrung auto production, sending prices for cars and trucks soaring.

Despite disruptions from Omicron, there are some indications of improvement in supply-chain woes. A December survey of manufacturers by the Institute for Supply Management showed [a decline in prices and delivery times](#), signaling that materials shortages might be easing.

Mr. Sharif of Inflation Insights expects used-car and household-furnishing prices to ease further in the coming months as consumers resume spending on services and run down the excess savings amassed during the pandemic.

Economists also expect price pressures from supply constraints to be replaced by higher rent and medical-care costs that tend to be more persistent. Rent, which accounts for nearly one-third of the CPI, has begun accelerating in recent months.

The broadening of price pressures is another sign to watch to gauge inflation's persistence, Ms. House of Wells Fargo said. The number of price categories experiencing inflation of 3% or more in the past year has nearly doubled since December 2020. That share is the highest it has been since 1991, she added.

High inflation has prompted some consumers to rein in spending.

Until recently, Pete and Sally McAllister grilled steak every Wednesday evening, but they recently switched to chicken chili because of the high cost of beef.

"The price we were paying [for filet mignon] went from about \$12 a pound to over \$25. As a result, we've cut those meals out of our diet," said Mr. McAllister, a 72-year-old retiree in Hilton Head, S.C. "The chicken and beans have been a good protein substitute for the beef."

He said he also has stopped adjusting the thermostat upward because of rising home-heating costs and is going out of his way to find cheaper gasoline. Mr. McAllister said he is golfing less after a number of friends canceled their golf-club memberships to save money. "So there's kind of a psychic price to inflation too," he said.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Australia grapples w/omicron wave
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/covid-free-utopia-australia-sees-omicron-surge-82216893
GIST	<p>SYDNEY -- Like millions of others in the most locked-down place on the planet, Melbourne resident Rav Thomas dutifully spent 262 days confined to his home as the COVID-19 pandemic raged. He got vaccinated. And the single father of two found ways to pay the bills as Melbourne's lockdowns — the longest imposed by any city in the world — battered his entertainment and events company.</p> <p>Then in October, the city's restrictions began to lift, along with Thomas' spirits. His company once again began booking events as Melbourne's nightclubs and bars reopened.</p> <p>And then, omicron arrived.</p> <p>The coronavirus variant has swept across Australia despite its high vaccination rate and strict border policies that kept the country largely sealed off from the world for almost two years. Those measures, which turned Australia into a virtually COVID-19-free utopia early in the pandemic, have garnered fresh scrutiny as the government has battled to deport unvaccinated tennis star Novak Djokovic ahead of the Australian Open . And they have prompted questions from frustrated and fatigued Australians about why their country — which seemingly did everything to stop the spread of of the virus — now finds itself infested with it.</p> <p>"Tell your population, 'Stay in your houses, you can't go past your letterbox after 8 p.m. for days and months on end.' And then you're told, 'OK, we've put in the hard yards,'" says Thomas, whose company,</p>

Anthem Entertainment, is now facing its 23rd consecutive month of financial loss as bookings once again dry up. “But then here we go again. Again. Again!”

Officially, there are now more than 600,000 active cases across Australia’s population of 26 million, though experts believe the actual number is far higher. The surge, health experts say, is partly due to the coinciding of two events: Politicians who were reluctant to renege on pre-omicron promises that they would relax restrictions such as mask-wearing, and the emergence of the incredibly contagious variant. Faced with the explosion of infections, the government of the most populous state, New South Wales, ultimately backtracked and reimposed mask mandates last month. But by then, epidemiologists say, it was too late.

While deaths and hospitalizations remain relatively low, the vaccines have not stopped the spread of the virus. Australia’s vaccine program — which has resulted in around 80% of the total population having at least one jab — also began later than many other Western countries, leaving much of its population yet to qualify for a booster.

“Vaccination alone isn’t good enough,” says epidemiologist Adrian Esterman, chair of biostatistics and epidemiology at the University of South Australia. “We were doing so well, until New South Wales decided it didn’t want to go into lockdown.”

Esterman has urged politicians to enforce mask-wearing and social distancing, and to improve ventilation in schools, particularly as students prepare to return after the southern hemisphere summer break. Children between the ages of 5 and 11 only became eligible for the vaccines this month.

“We haven’t got enough vaccines for youngsters,” says Esterman, who previously worked for the World Health Organization. “We know how to keep schools safe: First, get kids and teachers vaccinated, make sure ventilation is very good and you get the kids to wear masks. Do we do that in Australia? No.”

Though Australia’s high vaccine uptake has prevented an even worse crisis at stressed hospitals, Australian Medical Association President Dr. Omar Khorshid acknowledged it was difficult to watch Australia plummet from its position as a poster child for COVID-19 containment.

“It is certainly frustrating to see our case per head of population rate sort of getting toward the highest in the world in New South Wales, for instance, when we were at the lowest in the world not that long ago,” he said. “It’s a little unfortunate that the opening up of the country coincided almost perfectly with the omicron outbreak starting around the world.”

In recent months, the government has pivoted from its longstanding “COVID-zero” approach to a “live with it” approach, leaving many Australians confused.

“Omicron has changed everything,” Prime Minister Scott Morrison said this week. “My government is for keeping Australia open and pushing through.”

The policy whiplash also caught the health system off guard. Lines for PCR tests are often hours long, results take days, and a lack of rapid antigen tests has left sick Australians scurrying from store to store hunting for the kits.

Sydney resident Rodney Swan recently found himself among the hordes hunting for rapid tests. The 77-year-old’s granddaughter is ill, and her family has been isolating at home for days as they await the results of their PCR tests.

“If you do get a test that’s a PCR test, then you wait ages,” Swan says. “You can’t get a rapid antigen test. My daughter can’t get boosters for her children.”

Swan is frustrated by what he views as the government’s jumbled messaging, and is stunned by the skyrocketing case numbers.

“These are numbers that you get in England,” he says. “I’ve got friends in London, because I lived in London, and I sense the smirk that they have now looking at Australia.”

Australia’s slow start to its booster program has left the population vulnerable to omicron, and has also increased the chances that its omicron wave will not decline as rapidly as other countries, says epidemiologist Dr. Nancy Baxter, head of the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at Melbourne University.

Australia’s politicians appear worried that any new restrictions will anger the public, Baxter says. But they can still help slow the spread by providing Australians with a limited number of free N95 masks and rapid tests, she says.

“We could manage the wave, but there's no political will to do so,” Baxter says.

Fury and fear prompted former Australian human rights commissioner Chris Sidoti to pen an opinion piece for the Sydney Morning Herald this week, detailing the terror he felt when his two immunocompromised grandchildren become ill with COVID-19 after Christmas, two weeks before they were eligible for the vaccine. Both children have been in and out of the hospital since then.

Sidoti blames his grandchildren’s plight on the government. Why, he asks, wasn’t the government prepared with adequate supplies of rapid tests before the PCR system became inevitably overwhelmed? And why did the New South Wales premier roll back restrictions such as mask-wearing in November, before young children were eligible for vaccines and before most adults were eligible for boosters?

“We have gone wrong from day one because our politicians are not prepared to learn and to prepare,” Sidoti said in an interview. “People have stopped listening because there’s no consistency, there’s no credibility and there are no answers.”

Though policymakers seem averse to further lockdowns, the omicron outbreak has prompted many Australians to stay home anyway, leaving small business owners worried about their companies’ survival.

“People are quite broken,” says Zara Madrusan, who owns several bars and restaurants in Melbourne. “We are basically in some kind of self-imposed lockdown. No one is going out, but there’s no protection for us, there’s no advice for us, there’s no financial support available. So we’re just supposed to muddle through.”

For Thomas, whose company is facing a deluge of event cancellations, the state’s decision this week to shut down indoor dance floors in hospitality and entertainment venues was another gut punch. He wonders what of his once-vibrant city will be left when this all ends.

“What is our objective now?” he says. “What is our finish line?”

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HEADLINE	01/12 China: cases detected; 14M to test again
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/chinas-tianjin-orders-testing-14-million-residents-82214849
GIST	<p>BEIJING -- The northern Chinese city of Tianjin ordered a second round of COVID-19 testing on all 14 million residents Wednesday following the discovery of 97 cases of the omicron variant during initial screenings that began Sunday.</p> <p>Residents were asked to remain where they are until the results of all the nucleic acid tests are received, the official Xinhua News Agency said.</p> <p>Xinhua said authorities have carried out almost 12 million tests so far, with 7.8 million samples returned. Infections were first reported on Saturday in the city that is only about an hour from Beijing, which is to host the Winter Olympics from Feb. 4.</p>

High-speed rail service and other forms of transportation between the cities have been suspended, leading to some disruptions in supply chains, including for packaged food items sold in convenience stores.

Tianjin's COVID-19 prevention and control office said all who have tested positive in the initial testing round were found to have the omicron variant, of which China has so far only reported a handful of cases. The source of the outbreak is still unknown and many who are spreading the strain may be doing so unwittingly because they show no symptoms.

Also in the north, two college students who traveled earlier this month by train from Tianjin tested positive for the virus Wednesday morning in the city of Dalian, city officials said. There was no word on what variant they had contracted.

The omicron variant spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, and has already become dominant in many countries. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show omicron is less likely to cause severe illness than the previous delta variant, and vaccination and a booster still offer strong protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.

Millions more Chinese are under lockdown in cities under the strict "dynamic zero-case policy" that has allowed China to largely contain major outbreaks, although at considerable cost to local economies.

Hong Kong has closed kindergartens and primary schools after infections were discovered among students, banned flights from the United States and seven other countries and held 2,500 passengers on a cruise ship for coronavirus testing Wednesday as the city attempted to stem an emerging omicron outbreak.

The semiautonomous Chinese city has tightened pandemic-related restrictions in recent days after discovering the omicron variant had spread beyond people arriving from overseas.

In total, China announced 166 new cases of COVID-19 in the 24 hours before Wednesday, including 33 in Tianjin and 118 in Henan province but just eight in the city of Xi'an, home to the famed Terracotta Warrior statues and major industries, where a lockdown was imposed Dec. 23.

Authorities also released news of an inspection to Henan last week by Vice Premier Sun Chunlan, who called for stepped-up measures to prevent the spread of both delta and omicron variants. COVID-19 has spread to three cities in the province, including Yuzhou, Anyang, and the provincial capital Zhengzhou, prompting travel bans and various levels of lockdown.

"It is necessary to do a good job in guaranteeing the living needs of the people in the closed and controlled communities, ensure the basic medical needs of the people during the epidemic period, and ensure that the people's demands can be responded to and resolved in a timely manner," Sun was quoted as saying.

Some Xi'an residents have complained at their inability to source food and other daily necessities.

China has sacked or otherwise punished a number of officials for dereliction of duty related to the pandemic response, including failing to prevent new infections. On Wednesday, Anyang authorities cited 61 government departments and 11 officials in violation. Punishments ranged from verbal warnings to dismissal, according to a city government notice.

Ensuring the Olympics are free of any outbreaks is a key concern for the ruling Communist Party. Athletes, officials and journalists are operating in a closed-loop bubble to prevent them from coming into contact with the general public from the time they arrive in Beijing until their departure. If fully vaccinated, they will not have to undergo the standard 21-day quarantine.

	<p>In addition, the International Olympic Committee has issued a guidance document advising attendees to avoid crowded places such as bars and restaurants and avoid physical contact with others five days before departing.</p> <p>Attendees are required to provide two negative PCR tests before they travel and will be tested twice daily while in China.</p> <p>Participants should “absolutely not let your guard down” even after testing negative, the IOC said.</p> <p>China has banned fans from outside the country from attending and it appears Beijing plans to distribute only a small number of tickets to carefully selected spectators.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Omicron Britain, US headed for rapid drop?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/omicron-headed-rapid-drop-us-britain-82206037
GIST	<p>Scientists are seeing signals that COVID-19's alarming omicron wave may have peaked in Britain and is about to do the same in the U.S., at which point cases may start dropping off dramatically.</p> <p>The reason: The variant has proved so wildly contagious that it may already be running out of people to infect, just a month and a half after it was first detected in South Africa.</p> <p>“It’s going to come down as fast as it went up,” said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.</p> <p>At the same time, experts warn that much is still uncertain about how the next phase of the pandemic might unfold. The plateauing or ebbing in the two countries is not happening everywhere at the same time or at the same pace. And weeks or months of misery still lie ahead for patients and overwhelmed hospitals even if the drop-off comes to pass.</p> <p>“There are still a lot of people who will get infected as we descend the slope on the backside,” said Lauren Ancel Meyers, director of the University of Texas COVID-19 Modeling Consortium, which predicts that reported cases will peak within the week.</p> <p>The University of Washington's own highly influential model projects that the number of daily reported cases in the U.S. will crest at 1.2 million by Jan. 19 and will then fall sharply “simply because everybody who could be infected will be infected,” according to Mokdad.</p> <p>In fact, he said, by the university's complex calculations, the true number of new daily infections in the U.S. — an estimate that includes people who were never tested — has already peaked, hitting 6 million on Jan. 6.</p> <p>In Britain, meanwhile, new COVID-19 cases dropped to about 140,000 a day in the last week, after skyrocketing to more than 200,000 a day earlier this month, according to government data.</p> <p>Kevin McConway, a retired professor of applied statistics at Britain’s Open University, said that while cases are still rising in places such as southwest England and the West Midlands, the outbreak may have peaked in London.</p> <p>The figures have raised hopes that the two countries are about to undergo something similar to what happened in South Africa, where in the span of about a month the wave crested at record highs and then fell significantly.</p> <p>“We are seeing a definite falling-off of cases in the U.K., but I’d like to see them fall much further before we know if what happened in South Africa will happen here,” said Dr. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at Britain’s University of East Anglia.</p>

Differences between Britain and South Africa, including Britain's older population and the tendency of its people to spend more time indoors in the winter, could mean a bumpier outbreak for the country and other nations like it.

On the other hand, British authorities' decision to adopt minimal restrictions against omicron could enable the virus to rip through the population and run its course much faster than it might in Western European countries that have imposed tougher COVID-19 controls, such as France, Spain and Italy.

Shabir Mahdi, dean of health sciences at South Africa's University of Witwatersrand, said European countries that impose lockdowns won't necessarily come through the omicron wave with fewer infections; the cases may just be spread out over a longer period of time.

On Tuesday, the World Health Organization said there have been 7 million new COVID-19 cases across Europe in the past week, calling it a "tidal wave sweeping across the region." WHO cited modeling from Mokdad's group that predicts half of Europe's population will be infected with omicron within about eight weeks.

By that time, however, Hunter and others expect the world to be past the omicron surge.

"There will probably be some ups and downs along the way, but I would hope that by Easter, we will be out of this," Hunter said.

Still, the sheer numbers of people infected could prove overwhelming to fragile health systems, said Dr. Prabhat Jha of the Centre for Global Health Research at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto.

"The next few weeks are going to be brutal because in absolute numbers, there are so many people being infected that it will spill over into ICUs," Jha said.

Mokdad likewise warned in the U.S.: "It's going to be a tough two or three weeks. We have to make hard decisions to let certain essential workers continue working, knowing they could be infectious."

Omicron could one day be seen as a turning point in the pandemic, said Meyers, at the University of Texas. Immunity gained from all the new infections, along with new drugs and continued vaccination, could render the coronavirus something with which we can more easily coexist.

"At the end of this wave, far more people will have been infected by some variant of COVID," Meyers said. "At some point, we'll be able to draw a line — and omicron may be that point — where we transition from what is a catastrophic global threat to something that's a much more manageable disease."

That's one plausible future, she said, but there is also the possibility of a new variant — one that is far worse than omicron — arising.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Kazakhstan: Russia-led troops to pull out
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/kazakh-leader-russia-led-security-group-pull-troops-82193275
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- The president of Kazakhstan announced Tuesday that a Russia-led security alliance will start pulling out its troops from the Central Asian nation in two days after completing its mission.</p> <p>The mostly Russian troops were deployed to Kazakhstan last week by the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance of six former Soviet states, at the president's request amid the worst public unrest the former Soviet nation has faced since gaining independence 30 years ago.</p> <p>Protests over soaring fuel prices erupted in the oil and gas-rich Central Asian nation of 19 million on Jan. 2 and quickly spread across the country, with political slogans reflecting wider discontent over the</p>

country's authoritarian government. Over the next few days, the demonstrations turned violent, with dozens of civilians and law enforcement officers killed.

In Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital and largest city, protesters set government buildings on fire and briefly seized the airport. The unrest was largely quelled by the weekend.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has blamed the unrest on foreign-backed “terrorists” and insisted that his request for help to the CSTO was justified.

“When this decision was being made, we could have completely lost control over Almaty, which was being torn apart by terrorists. Had we lost Almaty, we would have lost the capital and the entire country,” Tokayev told Kazakhstan's parliament Tuesday.

The president said the CSTO has largely completed its mission and will start withdrawing its troops in two days — a process that will take no longer than 10 days.

Asked whether such a move was premature — the troops only started arriving to Kazakhstan five days ago — Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it was “utterly and completely” Kazakhstan's prerogative. “It is their analysis, and we have no right to interfere,” Peskov said.

Tokayev also appointed a new prime minister and a new cabinet on Tuesday, with some deputy prime ministers and ministers from the previous government keeping their posts.

Kazakhstan's government resigned last week in one of several concessions aimed at mollifying the protesters, along with a 180-day cap on fuel prices and the ouster of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's former longtime leader, from his influential post of head of the National Security Council.

The new prime minister, 49-year-old Alikhan Smailov, previously served as Kazakhstan's minister of finance and its first deputy prime minister.

Life in Almaty, which was hit by the harshest violence, started returning to normal this week, with public transport resuming operations and malls reopening. The owners of shops looted in the unrest were assessing the damage.

Galina Karpenko's underwear store was ransacked, and she said she lost about \$10,000 in stolen goods and damage.

“This is not a small sum for me. It’s really not. I closed several outlets because of the crisis, as we couldn’t afford the rent. And now, my favorite outlet that was turning a profit and feeding my family took a hit,” she said. “I’m so distressed, God is my witness, I don’t know how to feed my kids.”

Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry on Tuesday reported that 9,900 people were detained over the unrest. Tokayev's office has also said 338 criminal probes into mass unrest and assaults on law enforcement officers have been opened.

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HEADLINE	01/11 NKorea: successful test hypersonic missile
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/north-korea-claims-successful-test-hypersonic-missile-82210652
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- North Korea said Wednesday its leader Kim Jong Un oversaw a successful flight test of a hypersonic missile he claimed would remarkably increase the country’s nuclear “war deterrent.”</p> <p>The state media report came a day after the militaries of the United States, South Korea and Japan said they detected North Korea firing a suspected ballistic missile into its eastern sea.</p>

The Korean Central News Agency said Tuesday's launch involved a hypersonic glide vehicle, which after its release from the rocket booster demonstrated "glide jump flight" and "corkscrew maneuvering" before hitting a sea target 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) away. Photos released by the agency showed a missile mounted with a pointed cone-shaped payload soaring into the sky while leaving a trail of orange flames and Kim watching from a small cabin with top officials, including his sister Kim Yo Jong.

The launch was North Korea's second test of its purported hypersonic missile in a week, a type of weaponry it first tested in September, as Kim Jong Un continues a defiant push to expand his nuclear weapons capabilities in the face of international sanctions, pandemic-related difficulties and deadlocked diplomacy with the United States.

The North has been ramping up its testing activity since last fall, demonstrating various missiles and delivery systems apparently designed to overwhelm missile defense systems in the region. Experts say Kim is trying to apply more pressure on rivals Washington and Seoul to accept it as a nuclear power in hopes of winning relief from economic sanctions.

It was the first time since March 2020 that North Korean state media reported Kim's attendance at a missile test.

The KCNA said Kim praised his military scientists and officials involved in developing the hypersonic missile system, which he described as the most significant part of a new five-year plan announced in early 2021 to build up the North's military force.

The North has described the new missile as part of its "strategic" weaponry, implying that the system is being developed to deliver nuclear weapons.

"The superior maneuverability of the hypersonic glide vehicle was more strikingly verified through the final test-fire," KCNA said. It said Kim stressed the need to speed up the expansion of the country's "strategic military muscle both in quality and quantity and further modernize the army" and vowed further success in "remarkably increasing the war deterrent of the country."

Hypersonic weapons, which fly at speeds in excess of Mach 5, or five times the speed of sound, could pose a crucial challenge to missile defense systems because of their speed and maneuverability. Such weapons were on a wish-list of sophisticated military assets Kim unveiled last year along with multi-warhead missiles, spy satellites, solid-fuel long-range missiles and submarine-launched nuclear missiles.

Experts say North Korea needs more successful and longer-range tests that would take years before acquiring a credible hypersonic system.

"North Korea seems to believe that hypersonic weapons are game changers and provide entrance into the nuclear club when the U.S., Russia, and China have been racing to build them," said Duyeon Kim, a senior analyst at Washington's Center for a New American Security.

She said the North's recent advancements in its missile program indicate an aim to secure a "second-strike nuclear capability, make its missiles modern and more survivable, reassure the North Korean people of its military might and credibly gain entrance into the nuclear club."

U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Washington condemns the North's latest launch, which violates multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions, and urged Pyongyang to engage in "sustained and substantive dialogue."

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the launch highlighted the "destabilizing impact of (North Korea's) illicit weapons program" but didn't pose an immediate threat to U.S. territory or its allies.

Minutes after Tuesday's launch, airports across the western United States halted flights for a short time without explanation. A spokeswoman for San Diego International Airport referred questions to the Federal Aviation Administration.

The FAA acknowledged the "ground stop" in a tweet, without offering a reason why it issued the order.

"Full operations resumed in less than 15 minutes," the FAA said. "The FAA regularly takes precautionary measures. We are reviewing the process around this ground stop as we do after all such events."

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff had said the North Korean missile flew 700 kilometers (434 miles) at a maximum speed of around Mach 10 before landing in waters off the North's eastern coast.

South Korea's Defense Ministry had played down North Korea's earlier test on Jan. 5, insisting that the North exaggerated its capabilities after testing a conventional ballistic missile. Following Tuesday's launch, the Joint Chief of Staff acknowledged that the North demonstrated more advanced capability compared to its previous test.

Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi described the new missile as hypersonic and said the North's efforts to advance its missile capabilities posed a serious threat to Japan. He said Japan will consider all options, including the possibility of pursuing pre-emptive strike capabilities, to strengthen its defense.

Kim Jong Un entered the new year renewing his vow to bolster his military forces, even as the nation grapples with pandemic-related difficulties that have further strained its economy, which is crippled by U.S.-led sanctions over its nuclear program.

The economic setbacks have left Kim with little to show for his diplomacy with former U.S. President Donald Trump, which derailed after their second meeting in 2019 when the Americans rejected North Korea's demand for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

The Biden administration, whose policies have reflected a broader shift in U.S. focus from counterterrorism and so-called rogue states like North Korea and Iran to confronting China, has said it's willing to resume talks with North Korea at any time without preconditions.

But North Korea has so far rejected the idea of open-ended talks, saying the U.S. must first withdraw its "hostile policy," a term Pyongyang mainly uses to describe the sanctions and joint U.S.-South Korea military drills.

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HEADLINE	01/12 NATO, Russia high-level talks amid tension
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nato-russia-high-level-talks-ukraine-tensions-simmer-82217096
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- Senior NATO and Russian officials are meeting Wednesday to try to bridge seemingly irreconcilable differences over the future of Ukraine, amid deep skepticism that Russian President Vladimir Putin's security proposals for easing tensions are genuine.</p> <p>The meeting comes during a week of high-stakes diplomacy and a U.S.-led effort to prevent preparations for what Washington believes could be a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moscow denies it is planning an attack. Still, its history of military action in Ukraine and Georgia worries NATO.</p> <p>Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko and Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin will lead Moscow's delegation at the NATO-Russia Council, the first time it's convened in over two years. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will also be at NATO headquarters in Brussels.</p>

The meeting is due to run for about three hours. The NATO-Russia Council, their chief forum for talks, was set up two decades ago but full meetings paused when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014. It has met only sporadically since, the last time in July 2019.

With around 100,000 combat-ready Russian troops backed by tanks, artillery and heavy equipment massed just across Ukraine's eastern border, Wednesday's gathering has taken on great significance, yet it still seems destined to fail.

"These are completely unacceptable proposals," Estonian Defense Minister Kalle Laanet told public broadcaster ERR on the eve of the talks.

Estonia, like its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Lithuania, relies on U.S. security guarantees provided by its membership in NATO. The three Baltic nations were once ruled by the Soviet Union but are now part of the European Union and NATO.

Putin says Russia's demands are simple, but key parts of the proposals contained in the documents that Moscow has made public — a draft agreement with NATO countries and the offer of a treaty between Russia and the United States — won't pass muster at the 30-country military organization.

NATO would have to agree to halt all membership plans, not just with Ukraine, and scale down its presence in countries like Estonia close to Russia's borders. In exchange, Russia would pledge to limit its war games, as well as end aircraft buzzing incidents and other low-level hostilities.

Endorsing such an agreement would require NATO to reject a key part of its founding treaty. Under Article 10 of the 1949 Washington Treaty, the organization can invite in any willing European country that can contribute to security in the North Atlantic area and fulfill the obligations of membership.

"It has become crystal clear that not a single ally inside the NATO alliance is willing to budge or negotiate anything as it relates to NATO's open door policy," Julianne Smith, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, said Tuesday. "I cannot imagine any scenario where that is up for discussion."

Maksim Samorukov, a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, says the lack of any real Russian concessions in Putin's draft agreement probably means that "Russia is ready to tolerate a failure of these negotiations."

The idea, Samorukov said, is to "demonstrate to the West that we are serious, we mean business. That Russia is really ready to take drastic steps to impose these concessions" on the U.S.-led military organization.

Still, NATO can't afford to ignore Russia's offer. Some members fear that Putin may be seeking a pretext to launch an invasion — like the failure of the West to engage — and any talks that would ease tensions over border forces, missile deployments or war games would be welcome.

For the Kremlin, though, time is of the essence.

Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday that this week's talks have, so far, provided little reason for optimism. He said the outcome of Wednesday's meeting, and one at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on Thursday, could determine whether it makes sense to continue talking.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Kazakhstan: 12,000 arrests in violent unrest
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/kazakhstan-detains-1700-violent-unrest-82217340
GIST	MOSCOW -- Kazakh authorities said Wednesday they detained 1,678 more people in the past 24 hours over their alleged participation in the violent unrest that rocked the former Soviet nation last week, the worst since Kazakhstan gained independence three decades ago.

The additional detentions, reported by authorities in Almaty, the country's largest city that was hit the hardest by the turmoil, brought the total number of arrests to about 12,000. More than 300 criminal investigations into mass unrest and assaults on law enforcement officers have been opened.

Protests over soaring fuel prices erupted in the oil- and gas-rich Central Asian nation of 19 million on Jan. 2 and quickly spread across the country, with political slogans reflecting wider discontent over the country's authoritarian government.

As the unrest mounted, the authorities attempted to mollify the protesters and announced a 180-day cap on fuel prices. The ministerial Cabinet resigned, and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's former longtime leader, was ousted from his influential post of head of the National Security Council.

Still, over the next few days, the demonstrations turned violent, with dozens of civilians and law enforcement officers killed.

In Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital and largest city, protesters set government buildings on fire and briefly seized the airport. The unrest was largely quelled by last weekend.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has blamed the unrest on foreign-backed "terrorists" and requested help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, a Russia-led military alliance comprising of six ex-Soviet states. The bloc authorized sending 2,500 troops to Kazakhstan.

Tokayev said Tuesday that the CSTO will start withdrawing its troops this week, as they have completed their mission and the situation in the country has stabilized.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Navy to comply w/Hawaii health officials
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/navy-comply-orders-amid-water-contamination-crisis/story?id=82196196
GIST	<p>Navy leaders were questioned by the House Armed Services subcommittee on Readiness on Tuesday concerning the November fuel leak at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility in Hawaii that contaminated drinking water for thousands of households.</p> <p>The Navy announced in the hearing that it will follow orders from state health officials to halt operations at its Red Hill facility.</p> <p>"The Navy caused this problem," said Blake Converse, rear admiral of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, during the hearing. "We own it. And we're going to fix it."</p> <p>He said that the recent spill is likely due to an operator error, but that an independent investigation will look into potential causes, as well as systemic connections to past spills at the facility.</p> <p>The Navy is responsible for ensuring safe water for nearby residents, according to branch officials, and has been ordered by the state's department of health to provide alternative drinking water to about 93,000 residents who may be affected.</p> <p>On Nov. 20, Navy Region Hawaii Public Affairs released a statement concerning a leakage of water and fuel at a nearby tank farm. At the time they reported there were "no signs or indication of any releases to the environment, and the drinking water remains safe to drink."</p> <p>The DOH later said it collected drinking water samples on Nov. 24 from the Red Hill water supply shaft as a part of routine testing. The results suggested "a trace amount of heavy oil in the samples well below drinking water thresholds and not clearly related to petroleum fuel."</p>

On Nov. 28, residents in military housing on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, began reporting "vapors, discoloration and contamination" of the water provided by the Red Hill shaft well which sits near the Navy's Red Hill bulk fuel storage facility, according to Converse.

The Hawaii Department of Health received almost 500 complaints of fuel or gasoline-like odor from people who receive water from the Navy water system.

In early December, health officials and the Navy advised residents in Pearl Harbor to stop using tap water after dangerous levels of petroleum products were found in the water system at the Joint Base at Pearl Harbor-Hickam.

According to Captain Michael McGinnis, the U.S. Pacific Fleet surgeon and senior medical adviser, his medical team screened over 5,900 patients during the response to the incident.

"Patient symptoms were consistent with an acute environmental exposure event," he said. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, headache, diarrhea, skin or eye irritation, according to McGinnis.

"Once patients were removed from the water source, the symptoms rapidly resolved," McGinnis added.

The DOH ordered the Navy to immediately install a drinking water treatment system at the Red Hill Shaft and submit a work plan to assess system integrity. Within 30 days of completing the correction action, the Navy must then defuel the underground storage tanks there.

On Jan. 7, according to Converse, the Pacific Fleet Commander Samuel J. Paparo directed full compliance with the Hawaii Department of Health Emergency Order associated with Red Hill.

He has contracted an independent third party to investigate assessments to restore Red Hill to operation and make preparations to defuel the facility

Members of the subcommittee questioned whether Red Hill was too much of a risk to keep open.

"The Navy repeatedly stated that these investments would ensure that Oahu's drinking water was safe," said Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif. "Unfortunately, as we have watched this crisis unfold over the last three months, it is apparent that that was not the case."

He added, "The Red Hill facility was an astounding feat of engineering in the 1940s ... Can billions of dollars of United States taxpayer money be asked to invest in this facility? Could it be better used in finding a new innovative engineering feat for this millennium, suitable for Modern Warfare?"

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HEADLINE	01/11 Schools eye parents amid staff shortages
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/schools-turn-parents-omicron-surge-staff-shortages/story?id=82200214
GIST	<p>School staffing shortages caused by the recent COVID-19 omicron surge have gotten so bad in at least two school districts that officials are turning to parents to keep classes going.</p> <p>The Palo Alto Unified School District in Palo Alto, California, made a plea amid its staffing shortage on Sunday when Superintendent Don Austin posted a video on the district's website announcing the "1 Palo Alto" initiative and asked parents to volunteer and work certain roles in the schools including food services, light custodial work, office assistance and classroom support.</p> <p>"We can't keep up, there is no labor pool. No amount of money can solve this issue. We need your help," he said in the video.</p> <p>Volunteers needed to be vaccinated and were subject to testing, Austin said. High school students who have free time in their schedule were also eligible to participate in the program.</p>

Austin told ABC News that 659 volunteers have signed up for the program.

"This is the most exciting thing I've seen in a while," he told ABC News.

Shailo Rao, a parent of two children in the Palo Alto district, [told ABC San Francisco affiliate KGO](#) that he volunteered because he didn't want students to miss out on in-person learning.

"I mean, we talk about essential services and somewhere along the way, schools got lost," Rao told KGO.

Austin said the program would run until the current surge in cases decreases and staffing is at higher levels. He didn't immediately provide more details to ABC News about the volunteers' duties.

The situation is different in the Hays Consolidated Independent School District, located southwest of Austin, Texas.

Tim Savoy, a spokesman for Hays CISD, told ABC News that the district sent out emails to parents and a call on social media for more substitute teachers, even if they don't have college training.

"The parents would still have to apply, pass the fingerprint criminal background check, and do the orientation. However, if the principal knows them and recommends them, we can waive the requirement that they have at least 30 college hours," Savoy told ABC News.

Normally, the Hays CISD would have a pool of 500 substitute teachers available, but because of the delta variant, the district started the school year with only 100, Savoy said. The pool increased to 300, however the omicron variant has made the demand for substitutes increase, according to Savoy.

"Today, we had 292 requests for subs," Savoy said Tuesday.

As of Tuesday, three parents have signed up to be substitutes, but Savoy said that other school staff members have stepped in to assist with classes.

"Though it's challenging to have the increased teacher absences; it's a sign that people who have either tested positive, are showing symptoms, or who have had close contact, are heeding the call to quarantine," he said in a statement.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Israel: not bound by any nuclear deal w/Iran
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-wont-be-bound-by-any-nuclear-deal-with-iran-bennett-says-2022-01-10/
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM, Jan 10 (Reuters) - Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Monday that Israel would not be bound by any nuclear deal with Iran and would continue to consider itself free to act "with no constraints" against its arch-foe if necessary.</p> <p>Indirect talks between Iran and the United States on salvaging the 2015 Iran nuclear deal resumed a week ago in Vienna. France's foreign minister said on Friday that progress had been made, although time is running out.</p> <p>"In regard to the nuclear talks in Vienna, we are definitely concerned ... Israel is not a party to the agreements," Bennett said in public remarks, in a briefing to a parliamentary committee.</p> <p>"Israel is not bound by what will be written in the agreements, if they are signed, and Israel will continue to maintain full freedom of action anywhere any time, with no constraints," he said.</p>

	<p>Israel has called on world powers to maintain a credible military option against Iran while they pursue an agreement.</p> <p>Some experts have questioned whether Israel, on its own, has the military capabilities to halt what it says is an Iranian quest for nuclear weapons. Iran denies that it seeks atomic arms.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Covid endures: testing system in place?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/covid-us-long-time-kind-testing/story?id=81961010
GIST	<p>Throughout the pandemic, periodic surges in demand for COVID-19 testing -- typically during a spike in cases or prior to holiday travel -- have put strain on the nation's testing capacity.</p> <p>During these times, it can be difficult for people to quickly learn if they are positive for the virus -- and to isolate if they are.</p> <p>Testing is something the U.S. has struggled to get right from the get-go, from strict rules and problems with the initial test kits to how to manage supply and demand during peaks and lulls. In 2021, America grappled with how to manage the volume of tests needed in a fully reopened country with schools and workplaces requiring regular testing, pressures exacerbated during the highly contagious omicron variant hitting ahead of the holidays.</p> <p>This presents a real problem because experts believe a successful COVID-19 testing regime -- along with vaccinations -- is the key to building a new normal.</p> <p>Over the course of the pandemic, the number and types of tests have proliferated, turnaround times for results have varied and other questions arose, including which test should be used and when and where should they be administered.</p> <p>So how can the U.S. increase access to tests, and what kind of infrastructure is needed if COVID is going to be an endemic disease, meaning it is always circulating within the population but at low rates. What kind of testing system is needed to prevent further outbreaks fueled by variants including delta and omicron?</p> <p>Testing experts told ABC News the answer is decentralizing the system and delivering tests to patients directly, setting up community sites with reliable rapid molecular testing and being able to test people for multiple diseases at one time -- including COVID.</p> <p>The tests we have now</p> <p>Currently, the U.S. has two different types of viral tests used to diagnose COVID-19: antigen tests and molecular tests.</p> <p>Antigen tests, also known as rapid tests, look for antigens, or proteins, from the coronavirus and return results usually within less than an hour. Molecular tests, also known as PCR tests, are run in a laboratory for viral material and typically return results within three days.</p> <p>PCR tests are mostly administered at government-run sites, urgent care centers, doctor's offices and pharmacies, many of which have seen long lines amid the surge fueled by the omicron variant. At-home antigen tests have soared in popularity in recent weeks as way to avoid lines and quickly determine whether or not a person is infected.</p> <p>How quickly the omicron variant continues to spread will determine whether the U.S. has enough testing capacity for now, the experts say.</p>

"Certainly we have a lot of testing and I think, currently, in the country we can provide well north of two or three million [lab] tests in a day when you consider everything that's available," Dr. William Morice, chair of the Department of Laboratory Medicine at Mayo Clinic, told ABC News.

Currently, the U.S. is performing an average of 1.7 million COVID-19 tests per day, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, experts say we should be performing more tests than that.

Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious diseases specialist at the University of California, San Francisco, told ABC News that the U.S. needs to be performing many more tests -- upwards of 2 or 3 million per day -- so infected people can get the treatment they need more quickly, avoid being sent to the hospital and contact tracing can occur.

"Use of testing, it's not as much to show how many cases we have, but it's actually used for diagnosis " Chin-Hong said. "When people use testing early on, they can get better bang for their buck with early therapies and prevent them from going to the hospital.

He continued, "A PCR test can trigger contact tracing, early therapy. There are a lot of other domino effects of testing that's simply just more than 'I have another case in my community.' It actually ends up potentially saving hospital resources."

Morice believes that if cases continue to rise, then the supply could be strained. The U.S. is recording an average of more than 668,000 infections per day (as of Jan. 7) -- the most ever since the pandemic began, although this figure is partially due to a backlog of data reporting over the holidays.

"When the virus is not prevalent and less common in communities, the testing that we've had, for example here in Seattle, has been quite adequate," Dr. Geoffrey Baird, chair of the Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology at UW Medicine, told ABC News. "I think we have plenty of testing available if we were just testing people who have symptoms."

He continued, "But when you have to test asymptomatic people before traveling, before gatherings, before school or before sports, that ends up getting difficult to so support because the absolute number of tests needed can get very, very large."

The experts say that infectious disease modelers didn't predict the emergence of the omicron variant or how quickly it would spread -- especially as people traveled over the holidays -- leading to increased demand for testing.

Dr. Brian Rubin, professor and chairman of the Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Institute at the Cleveland Clinic, told ABC News that at his lab, there have been about 50% more positive tests in 2021 than the year before.

During the previous winter surge, the clinic never had more than 1,000 positive tests per day. In late 2021, as many as 1,700 tests per day come back positive, he said. With as many as 4,000 to 5,000 tests being run every day, this puts a great amount of strain on hospitals, laboratory personnel and testing supplies.

The system we need

Rubin believes the key to building up a robust testing program is to decentralize the system the U.S. has even further, meaning more at-home testing without the need of a healthcare provider to order or perform the test.

"Anything we can do to automate that," he said. "Decentralizing is going to be the key. How do we not call their doctor to order the test, get them to swab themselves, et cetera."

He added, "If we can get really reliable testing into the hands of individuals so you can test at home without leaving your home, we can handle it."

Although most at-home tests currently on shelves are pretty reliable, some at-home tests are known to produce an abundance of false positives.

He envisions a system in which the U.S. uses Amazon or an Amazon-like service to deliver test kits to people's homes on a grander scale than what is already available.

People perform the test themselves, including swabbing and analyzing the sample. Once they get results, they scan a barcode or QR code, alerting public health officials of a positive test result rather than the person having to call a doctor or the local health department to inform them. Although some tests already do this, Rubin would like to see all tests have this capability.

At-home tests have a very low likelihood of delivering false positives if a person is symptomatic. So, under Rubin's proposed system, if the person is symptomatic and gets a positive result, they could stay home and therefore help eliminate long lines at testing sites and free up appointments at clinics.

However, person who is asymptomatic and gets a positive result from a delivered at-home test would be recommended to get PCR test to confirm they are truly infected with COVID.

Additionally, under Rubin's system, if someone is a contact of a positive patient, they would be informed and get guidance on whether to get tested or quarantine.

"We have all the pieces for home testing, but how do we make it super elegant and slick and make it as easy as possible," he said.

The Biden administration is trying to ramp up testing via a similar method: creating a website that will distribute 500 million free at-home rapid COVID tests to Americans, which officials promised will not cut into the current supply of tests on shelves.

Possible setbacks

However there are issues with rapid tests. At-home testing involves multiple steps and requires a clean workspace, meaning people may be performing the tests incorrectly. Additionally, rapid tests are more likely to return false negatives than laboratory tests because they are less sensitive.

This means that rapid tests have to detect enough antigens, or proteins, in the nose to return a positive result. However, laboratory tests, which look for genetic material, can return a positive result even if only trace amounts are detected.

Because of these potential issues, Baird says he is in favor of setting up community testing sites like UW Medicine has done in Washington that use rapid molecular tests.

These are like PCR tests, which are considered the gold standard of testing, but return results within a few hours rather than within a few days.

The UW community sites collect samples, which are then shipped by courier back to the main lab, where they can be quickly analyzed, Baird would like to see a similar system set up by big hospitals across the country.

"The chances of it giving a false negative are very, very low. No test is 100% perfect but it's as good as you can get and so we're doing the best we can by making the best possible test as expendable as possible," Baird said. "I'd be in favor of multiple community test sites like kiosks or trailers or other sites, it can be in retail spaces or something like that."

Morice said it's also important to have combination tests that check for multiple diseases such as COVID-19 and the flu, which are currently available -- although not at all clinics.

	"That will be really important and it's certainly needed," he said. "Last year was really anomalous in that we had no influenza whatsoever. Now we're seeing rates going back up so we'll need it for that reason."
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HEADLINE	01/11 Retail workers face pandemic challenge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/business/retail-workers-omicron-pandemic.html
GIST	<p>Long checkout lines. Closed fitting rooms. Empty shelves. Shortened store hours.</p> <p>Plus the dread of contracting the coronavirus and yet another season of skirmishes with customers who refuse to wear masks.</p> <p>A weary retail work force is experiencing the fallout from the latest wave of the pandemic, with a rapidly spreading variant cutting into staffing.</p> <p>While data shows that people infected with the Omicron variant are far less likely to be hospitalized than those with the Delta variant, especially if they are vaccinated, many store workers are dealing with a new jump in illness and exposures, grappling with shifting guidelines around isolation and juggling child care. At the same time, retailers are generally not extending hazard pay as they did earlier in the pandemic and have been loath to adopt vaccine or testing mandates.</p> <p>"We had gotten to a point here where we were comfortable, it wasn't too bad, and then all of a sudden this new variant came and everybody got sick," said Artavia Milliam, who works at H&M in Hudson Yards in Manhattan, which is popular with tourists. "It's been overwhelming, just having to deal with not having enough staff and then twice as many people in the store."</p> <p>Ms. Milliam, a member of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, is vaccinated but contracted the virus during the holidays, experiencing mild symptoms. She said that fewer employees were working registers and organizing clothing and that her store had been closing the fitting rooms in the mornings because nobody was available to monitor them.</p> <p>Macy's said last week that it would shorten store hours nationally on Mondays through Thursdays for the rest of the month. At least 20 Apple Stores have had to close in recent weeks because so many employees had contracted Covid-19 or been exposed to someone who had, and others have curtailed hours or limited in-store access.</p> <p>At a Macy's in Lynnwood, Wash., Liisa Luick, a longtime sales associate in the men's department, said, "Every day, we have call-outs, and we have a lot of them." She said the store had already reduced staff to cut costs in 2020. Now, she is often unable to take breaks and has fielded complaints from customers about a lack of sales help and unstaffed registers.</p> <p>"Morale could not be lower," said Ms. Luick, who is a steward for the local unit of the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Even though Washington has a mask mandate for indoor public spaces, "we get a lot of pushback, so morale is even lower because there's so many people who, there's no easy way to say this, just don't believe in masking," she added.</p> <p>Store workers are navigating the changing nature of the virus and trying their best to gauge new risks. Many say that with vaccinations and boosters, they are less fearful for their lives than they were in 2020 — the United Food and Commercial Workers union has tracked more than 200 retail worker deaths since the start of the pandemic — but they remain nervous about catching and spreading the virus.</p> <p>At a Stop & Shop in Oyster Bay, N.Y., Wally Waugh, a front-end manager, said that checkout lines were growing longer and that grocery shelves were not being restocked in a timely manner because so many people were calling in sick with their own positive tests or those of family members.</p>

That has forced remaining employees to work more hours. But even with overtime pay, many of his colleagues are not eager to stay in the store longer than they must. Mr. Waugh has started taking off his work clothes in his garage and immediately putting them in the laundry before entering his house — a routine he hadn't followed since the earliest days of the pandemic.

"People are not nervous like when Covid first started," said Mr. Waugh, who is a steward for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. "But we are gravely concerned."

At a QFC grocery store in Seattle, Sam Dancy, a front-end supervisor, said many colleagues were calling out sick. The store, part of a chain owned by Kroger, has closed early several times, and customers are helping to bag their own groceries. There are long lines, and some of the self-checkout lanes are closed because employees aren't available to oversee them.

"Some people are so tired of what's going on — you have some that are exposed and some that are using it as an excuse to not have to work to be around these circumstances," said Mr. Dancy, a member of the local food and commercial workers union, who has worked at the chain for 30 years. "I have anxiety till I get home, thinking, 'Do I have this or not?' It's a mental thing that I think a lot of us are enduring."

Shifting guidelines around isolation are also causing confusion at many stores. While H&M has instructed employees like Ms. Milliam to isolate for 14 days after testing positive for Covid-19, Macy's said in a memo to employees last week that it would adopt new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that recommended shortening isolation for infected people to five days from 10 if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are resolving.

But even if retailers shorten isolation periods, schools and day-care facilities may have longer quarantine periods for exposed families, putting working parents in a bind.

Ms. Luick of Macy's said she felt the guidance was aimed at "constantly trying to get people to work," and did not make her feel safer.

Even as Omicron spreads faster than other variants, employers have not shown a willingness to reinstitute previous precautions or increased pay, said Kevin Schneider, secretary-treasurer of a unit of the United Food and Commercial Workers in the Denver area.

Like many retailers, Kroger hasn't provided hazard pay nationally since the early stages of the pandemic, though the union is negotiating for it to be reinstated. The chain has also discontinued measures like controlling how many customers are allowed in stores at a time. The union has been asking for armed guards at all of its stores in the Denver area as incidents of violence increase.

"The company says they are providing a safe environment for workers to do their jobs in," Mr. Schneider said. "We don't believe that."

In a statement, a Kroger spokeswoman said, "We have been navigating the Covid-19 pandemic for nearly two years, and, in line with our values, the safety of our associates and customers has remained our top priority."

The company added that frontline employees had each received as much \$1,760 in additional pay to "reward and recognize them for their efforts during the pandemic."

Some workers have reached another breaking point. In Jacksonville, Fla., one Apple Store employee organized a brief walkout on Christmas Eve to protest working conditions after he witnessed a customer spitting on his colleague. Dozens of people at other stores also participated.

"It was my final straw," said Daryl Sherman II, who organized the walkout. "Something had to be done."

In some cases, municipalities have stepped in to obtain hazard pay for workers. In Seattle, Kroger has been required to pay grocery store employees like Mr. Dancy an extra \$4 an hour based on local legislation.

More broadly, the staffing shortages have put a new spotlight on a potential vaccine-or-testing mandate from the Biden administration, which major retailers have been resisting. The fear of losing workers appears to be looming large, especially now.

While the retail industry initially cited the holiday season rush for its resistance to such rules, it has more recently pointed to the burden of testing unvaccinated workers. After oral arguments in the case on Friday, the Supreme Court's conservative majority expressed skepticism about whether the Biden administration had legal authority to mandate that large employers require workers to be vaccinated.

The National Retail Federation, a major industry lobbying group, said in a statement last week that it "continues to believe that OSHA exceeded its authority in promulgating its vaccine mandate." The group estimated that the order would require 20 million tests a week nationally, based on external data on unvaccinated workers, and that "such testing capacity currently does not exist."

When the top managers at Mr. Waugh's Stop & Shop store began asking employees whether they were vaccinated in preparation for the federal vaccine mandates that could soon take effect, he said, a large number expressed concern to him about being asked to disclose that information.

"It was concerning to see that so many people were distressed," he said, though all of the employees complied.

Ms. Luick of Macy's near Seattle said that she worked with several vocal opponents of the Covid-19 vaccines and that she anticipated that at least some of her colleagues would resign if they were asked to provide vaccination status or proof of negative tests.

Still, Macy's was among major employers that started asking employees for their vaccination status last week ahead of the Supreme Court hearing on Friday and said it might require proof of negative tests beginning on Feb. 16.

"Our primary focus at this stage is preparing our members for an eventual mandate to ensure they have the information and tools they need to manage their work force and meet the needs of their customers," said Brian Dodge, president of the Retail Industry Leaders Association, which includes companies like Macy's, Target, Home Depot, Gap and Walmart.

As seasonal Covid-19 surges become the norm, unions and companies are looking for consistent policies. Jim Araby, director of strategic campaigns for the food and commercial workers union in Northern California, said the retail industry needed to put in place more sustainable supports for workers who got ill.

For example, he said, a trust fund jointly administered by the union and several employers could no longer offer Covid-related sick days for union members.

"We have to start treating this as endemic," Mr. Araby said. "And figuring out what are the structural issues we have to put forward to deal with this."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Nursing homes struggle: low booster rates
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/nursing-homes-struggle-low-booster-rates-staffing-issues/story?id=82184095
GIST	<p>As the omicron variant causes a surge in coronavirus cases, many long-term care facilities are facing challenges not seen in months, officials from around the country tell ABC News.</p> <p>Many nursing homes are struggling with low booster rates and a growing staffing crisis, said industry executives and health care advocates.</p>

"Nursing homes are on high alert right now," said Terry Fulmer, president of the John A. Hartford Foundation, a nonprofit that works to improve care for older adults. "Omicron is highly transmissible and is spreading through communities like wildfire."

In the week ending Jan. 2, nursing homes and long-term care facilities reported close to 15,000 cases across the country, three times the infection rate from just a month ago when facilities were reporting under 5,000 cases, data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows.

Cases among staff members have shot up at an even higher rate, with facilities reporting upwards of 34,000 cases in the week ending on Jan. 2, compared to just over 5,600 a month ago.

In Sussex County, New Jersey, the National Guard was deployed last week to assist nursing home staff with infection control protocols and other duties as multiple facilities saw COVID-19 outbreaks.

"The staff at these facilities have been particularly hard hit by the latest COVID variant," County Commissioner Anthony Fasano said in a statement. "We believed it was prudent to get them the help they needed before there was a crisis."

In California, after more than 5,000 new cases were reported in skilled nursing facilities, the state's public health officer, Tomas Aragon, announced that boosters will be mandatory for health care workers and that visitors will require additional testing.

According to the CDC data, the recent spread of the virus among long-term care residents is occurring primarily among unvaccinated and twice-vaccinated residents, while the infection rate remains low for residents that have received a booster shot.

For most adults, two doses of currently authorized COVID-19 vaccines dramatically reduce the risk of being hospitalized or dying of the virus. But elderly adults, whose immune defenses fade with age, may still be at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19, especially if it's been more than five months since their last shot.

As of Jan. 2, more than 87% of residents at nursing homes nationwide had received two shots, and nearly 62% had been boosted, according to the CDC data.

For industry advocates, increasing the number of residents and staff getting boosters is a priority.

"We have been urging long-term care providers to get ready and to get ahead of the surge by ramping up their booster efforts," said Cristina Crawford, a spokesperson for the American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living.

Hartford told ABC News that she's especially concerned that the rate of booster shots among staff is lagging behind.

"We have to increase our efforts to get boosters into the arms of both residents and staff," she said.

In Ohio, where around 40% of nursing home staffers remain unvaccinated and the 21-day case average is above 14,000, omicron has "exacerbated" the growing staffing crisis, said Pete Van Runkle, executive director of the Ohio Health Care Association.

"Cases in long-term care in Ohio are about four times as many with omicron as during the height of delta," Runkle told ABC News.

"The biggest problem with the incredibly high transmissibility is staff missing time from work," he said.

	<p>The good news, said Runkle, is that despite the rising number of cases, nursing homes are reporting "very few" COVID-related deaths compared to last winter's surge.</p> <p>Across the country, death rates among long-term care residents and staff have remained flat throughout the spread of omicron. Nationally, facilities have reported 405 deaths among residents in the week ending Jan. 2, compared to 485 deaths in the week ending Dec. 5, according to data released by the CDC.</p> <p>Pennsylvania state Health Care Association CEO Zach Shamberg said the good numbers are the result of a multi-pronged approach.</p> <p>"This is a complete 180 from what we have seen last year and is a credit to providers and front-line workers who are doing everything they can to mitigate the spread of the virus now that they better understand the virus, have PPE and tests, and most importantly, access to a vaccine and boosters that help provide an additional level of protection for residents and workers," Shamberg said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Chicago traffic cameras racial disparities
SOURCE	https://www.propublica.org/article/chicagos-race-neutral-traffic-cameras-ticket-black-and-latino-drivers-the-most?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=majorinvestigations&utm_content=feature
GIST	<p>When then-Mayor Richard M. Daley ushered in Chicago's red-light cameras nearly two decades ago, he said they would help the city curb dangerous driving. "This is all about safety, safety of pedestrians, safety of other drivers, passengers, everyone," he said.</p> <p>His successors echoed those sentiments as they expanded camera enforcement. "My goal is only one thing, the safety of our kids," Rahm Emanuel said in 2011, as he lobbied for the introduction of speed cameras. And in 2020, Lori Lightfoot assured residents her expansion of the program was "about making sure that we keep communities safe."</p> <p>But for all of their safety benefits, the hundreds of cameras that dot the city — and generate tens of millions of dollars a year for City Hall — have come at a steep cost for motorists from the city's Black and Latino neighborhoods. A ProPublica analysis of millions of citations found that households in majority Black and Hispanic ZIP codes received tickets at around twice the rate of those in white areas between 2015 and 2019.</p> <p>The consequences have been especially punishing in Black neighborhoods, which have been hit with more than half a billion dollars in penalties over the last 15 years, contributing to thousands of vehicle impoundments, driver's license suspensions and bankruptcies, according to ProPublica's analysis.</p> <p>"We felt the brunt of it the way white people didn't," said Olatunji Oboi Reed, a longtime activist for racial equity in transportation in Chicago who has received a handful of camera tickets over the years. "Fortunately, I've always been in a situation where I can survive financially, unlike many Black and brown people in the city; one ticket is throwing their whole finances in a hurricane."</p> <p>The coronavirus pandemic widened the ticketing disparities. Black and Latino workers have been far less likely than others to have jobs that allow them to work remotely, forcing them into their vehicles more often. In 2020, ProPublica found, the ticketing rate for households in majority-Black ZIP codes jumped to more than three times that of households in majority-white areas. For households in majority-Hispanic ZIP codes, there was an increase, but it was much smaller.</p> <p>Similar racial and income disparities in camera ticketing have been documented elsewhere. In Rochester, New York, officials eliminated the city's red-light camera program in 2016 in part because motorists from low-income neighborhoods received the most tickets and the financial harm outweighed any safety benefits. Miami ended its program in 2017 amid complaints from low-income residents who felt unfairly burdened by the fines. And in Washington, D.C., racial justice advocates are researching the city's camera-</p>

ticketing program after [a local think tank](#) in 2018 and [The Washington Post](#) last year found that cameras in Black neighborhoods issued a disproportionate share of tickets there.

Although some cities have eliminated their camera programs, automated enforcement has been gaining support elsewhere in the aftermath of the nation's racial reckoning following the death of George Floyd in 2020 at the hands of police. From [California](#) to [Virginia](#), citizens groups, [safety organizations](#), elected officials and others are pointing to cameras as a "race-neutral" alternative to potentially biased — and, for many Black men, fatal — police traffic stops.

And more funding for cameras may be coming: The [federal infrastructure bill](#) passed last fall allows states to spend federal dollars on traffic cameras in work and school zones.

In Chicago, officials have known of disparities since at least April 2020, when a pair of professors at the University of Illinois Chicago shared initial research showing that cameras send the most tickets to predominantly Black ZIP codes. The city then hired them to study the issue further.

Six months later, Lightfoot — who [campaigns in part](#) on ending what she called the city's "addiction" to fines and fees — proposed that Chicago expand camera ticketing by lowering the speeds at which cameras will issue citations. Lightfoot called it a public safety measure, especially in light of a spike in traffic fatalities during the pandemic, but many observers called it a money grab. The City Council approved the measure as part of the 2021 annual budget.

After the change went into effect last March, racial disparities persisted, ProPublica found.

When asked why the city expanded the program despite knowing of the racial disparities, Dan Lurie, Lightfoot's policy chief, said the administration saw that traffic fatalities were "at epidemic levels" and that was a "deep concern" to the mayor. "We feel strongly," he said, "that cameras are a tool in the toolkit to help alleviate that."

The city is not considering eliminating the cameras or shrinking the program, though Lurie said the administration would "evaluate" cameras at locations where there's evidence they do not reduce crashes.

A summary of the UIC research provided to ProPublica last week confirmed the racial disparities in red-light and speed-camera ticketing and found that most of the speed cameras improve safety.

City officials said they are trying to mitigate the financial harm caused by camera tickets. They pointed to a [pilot program](#) that halves the costs of fines and allows for some debt forgiveness for low-income residents. That initiative, which was announced last year with no mention of the racial inequities baked into the camera program, is scheduled to start by the end of March.

Lurie said the administration has been grappling with the "twin challenges" of improving traffic safety while "very intentionally ensuring that the burdens of fines and fees as a result of those kinds of efforts do not fall disproportionately on Black and brown residents."

The irony is that some of the factors that contribute to ticketing disparities, such as wider streets and lack of sidewalks in low-income communities of color, also make those neighborhoods more dangerous for pedestrians, cyclists and even motorists. According to a 2017 city report, Black Chicagoans are killed in traffic crashes at twice the rate of white residents.

The city's latest [transportation plan](#), which has a focus on racial equity, lays out a number of projects, such as improving crosswalks and building more bike lanes. City officials also said they plan to install more flashing signs that show drivers how fast they're going — devices known to help reduce speeds.

Lurie acknowledged that the best way to reduce traffic fatalities is to fix the underlying road infrastructure that contributes to unsafe driving. That way, he said, "Pedestrians are safer, you're safer and no one's

getting a fine. That's the ideal outcome here. We are dealing with, in many ways, after-the-fact consequences of streets that need to be rethought and redesigned."

Chicago's automated camera program began in 2003, after a 30-day "experiment" on opposite ends of Western Avenue recorded some 4,500 red-light violations. Over the next decade, the Daley administration installed cameras at dozens of intersections around the city.

Emanuel expanded the program further in 2013 to include speed cameras.

The Lightfoot-era expansion happened, fundamentally, through lowering the speed limit threshold for tickets, not by adding more cameras.

Today, motorists are monitored by cameras at close to 300 locations around the city, making Chicago's automated traffic enforcement program one of the largest in the country. Both red-light and speed cameras are distributed roughly evenly among the city's Black, Latino and white neighborhoods.

The cameras capture images of a vehicle's license plate as well as video of the alleged infraction, which is reviewed by a third-party vendor before a ticket is sent to the vehicle owner.

Each year the city issues approximately 1 million camera tickets, about evenly split between the two types of infractions. In all, cameras have generated more than \$1.3 billion in revenue since the first one was installed nearly two decades ago.

In general, research has found that the cameras help reduce serious accidents by changing driver behavior. Northwestern University [researchers found](#) in 2017 that the number of T-bone crashes — where one vehicle drives into the side of another — fell after red-light cameras were installed, as fewer people ran red lights. According to the executive summary of the latest research by UIC associate professors Stacey Sutton and Nebiyu Tilahun, speed cameras reduced the expected number of fatal crashes and those leading to severe injury by 15%.

Still, a wide array of observers has criticized the program as a revenue generator more than a public safety solution. Tickets for running a red light or going 11 or more miles per hour over the limit cost \$100; with late penalties that figure can grow to \$244. Citations for driving between 6 and 10 mph over the limit cost \$35, an amount that increases to \$85 when late.

Almost half of the tickets received by low-income residents end up incurring additional penalties, according to the research by Sutton and Tilahun, both of whom are in UIC's College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs. For upper-income residents, 17% of tickets end up with additional fees.

Over the years, many residents have protested that the camera tickets hurt poor people who struggle to pay the fines in time to avoid hefty late penalties and collections fees.

The issue became a priority for Reed, who leads the nonprofit Equiticity, an advocacy and research organization focused on transportation equity, when he saw how much the city relied on enforcement as a strategy to help eliminate traffic fatalities in the [Vision Zero Chicago plan](#) published in June 2017.

He has for years called on the city to stop ticketing cyclists in Black and Latino neighborhoods for riding on sidewalks and to instead improve infrastructure in those areas. He is keenly aware that people of color are disproportionately killed in traffic accidents in Chicago and across the country. But he says he doesn't think the city can ticket its way to safer streets.

At a September 2017 meeting, Reed and others asked city transportation officials to identify and eliminate any racial or geographic disparities in camera ticketing, emails show. The city never committed, Reed said.

“We didn’t subscribe to this notion that the answer to improved traffic safety is a punitive approach,” he said. “The root cause of traffic violence in our society that is disproportionately impacting Black and brown people is structural racism.”

The following February, [ProPublica reported](#) on how debt from parking and camera tickets disproportionately piled up in Chicago’s Black neighborhoods, sending tens of thousands of people into bankruptcy. The reporting has [prompted significant reforms](#) across the state.

This is the first time ProPublica has examined the disparities in camera ticketing itself, not just the financial consequences. The analysis relies on information obtained through public records requests from the city’s ticket database, including the ZIP code associated with the vehicle registration for every camera ticket issued since the program’s birth in 2003 through mid-2021.

ProPublica’s main analysis relies on ticketing from 2015 through 2019 to correspond with the most recent five-year census survey data. Ticketing rates were calculated based on the number of households in each ZIP code, as there is no available and reliable measure of motorists or vehicles by ZIP codes that covers that period.

The data shows how motorists from Black and Latino areas of the city have consistently received a higher share of camera tickets. The disparity persists when you include motorists who live anywhere in Cook County but drive in the city or if you include speed warnings to first-time violators. ProPublica excluded warnings from its main analysis because they carry no financial penalties.

Between 2015 and 2019, some 3.1 million camera tickets went to Chicago residents. The highest share, or about 38%, of those tickets went to motorists from majority-Black ZIP codes. By comparison, those ZIP codes account for 27% of households.

The disparity is less severe in majority-Hispanic ZIP codes, which account for 19% of tickets and 16% of households.

Households in the city’s majority Black ZIP codes received about four citations per household over that time period. That’s more than twice the rate for households in majority-white ZIP codes, which received fewer than two tickets. Households in Hispanic ZIP codes received more than three tickets per household during the same time period.

For their study, which relies on census-tract level ticket data, Sutton and Tilahun looked at a shorter time period, 2016 through 2019, and arrived at a similar conclusion.

Rodney Perry has been caught in the cycle of ticketing. The 28-year-old entrepreneur quit his job at a logistics firm last spring to build a digital marketing and production company. The work leads him to drive past the city’s cameras more than he did in his previous job. Last year, Perry received three tickets for running red lights and eight for speeding. Of the speeding tickets, five were for going just 6 or 7 mph over the limit — speeds that would not have triggered a ticket before Lightfoot lowered the threshold for tickets.

He paid some off, but the penalties eventually added up to more than \$700, money he said he did not have. He tried to get on a city payment plan but said he couldn’t figure out how to do that online. Because of the unpaid tickets, the city in November immobilized his 2018 Jeep Cherokee with a yellow Denver boot clamped over one of the front wheels outside his apartment. Perry had to borrow money from his older sister in Tennessee to get on a payment plan and get the boot removed, a process that came with yet more fines.

“Family doesn’t ever want to see you have any moment of struggle,” said Perry, who took on an extra job at a restaurant to help pay off the tickets and make ends meet. “It’s a financial impact, but mentally it’s where I was affected the most. Mentally and emotionally.”

Perry said he takes responsibility for getting tickets. But he can't help but notice something every time he drives through majority-Black neighborhoods: There are fewer pedestrians and more vacant lots and industrial areas.

"It's almost like you feel like there is nothing there. Nothing to slow you down," he said.

When Perry enters more densely populated Latino neighborhoods, he sees bustling commerce and more pedestrians. And in majority white neighborhoods, there are even more pedestrians and "a stop light every few blocks. A stop sign between those. Crosswalks," he said. "There's a million reasons to stop once you pass downtown on the North Side."

It all makes him wonder: Does the way a neighborhood looks affect whether a driver will get a ticket?

Consider the speed camera on West 127th Street, a few blocks east of South Halsted Street in West Pullman, a majority-Black neighborhood on the city's Far South Side.

The camera sits next to a fenced-in steel plant, overlooking a busy, four-lane stretch of road where the speed limit is 30 mph. [What allowed](#) the city to place a camera there — as speed cameras are only allowed near parks or schools — is a bike trail that cuts across the street a little west of the device. It's not a frequently used path; on a bright October morning, not one cyclist passed through in the half hour or so a pair of reporters observed the trail. No pedestrians walked along that stretch of West 127th Street, either; only one side of the street even has a sidewalk.

Meanwhile, dozens of semitrucks and passenger vehicles roared past.

About 20 miles north, another camera stands along a two-lane stretch of West Montrose Avenue that borders Horner Park in the whiter, more affluent Irving Park neighborhood.

Here, the speed limit is also 30 mph. Drivers have to slow down to maneuver around a concrete pedestrian island and over bright green and white crosswalks that lead into the park. That same October morning, reporters encountered more than a dozen pedestrians, cyclists, dog walkers and others near the camera in about a half hour.

In 2020, the camera on West 127th Street issued 22,389 tickets to motorists caught driving 11 mph or more over the speed limit, each costing \$100.

The one on West Montrose Avenue? Five.

Drivers intuitively slow down when confronted with narrowed streets, speed bumps or other traffic, said Jesus Barajas, an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Science and Policy at the University of California Davis, who has studied transportation and infrastructure in Chicago. Wide roads without what are often called calming measures, like the ones on West Montrose Avenue, encourage speeding.

"If it feels like a highway, you're going to go 50," Barajas said.

ProPublica found that all 10 locations with the speed cameras that issued the most tickets for going 11 mph or more over the limit from 2015 through 2019 are on four-lane roads. Six of those locations are in majority Black census tracts.

Meanwhile, eight of the 10 locations where the fewest tickets were issued are on two-lane streets. And just two of the 10 are in majority Black census tracts. (The analysis focused on cameras near parks, because those devices operate for more hours and days than those by schools, leading them to issue the vast majority of tickets.)

Residential density is another factor. Denser neighborhoods have more cars, more traffic and more pedestrians, all factors that cause motorists to intuitively slow down, experts said.

And in Chicago, which has seen an exodus of Black residents in recent decades, Black neighborhoods are far less dense than their white counterparts.

Another factor in ticketing: proximity to expressways, which decades ago were built over Black communities in Chicago and across the nation. Seven of the 10 intersections with red-light cameras that issued the most tickets are within a block of an expressway entrance. Six of the 10 are in majority Black census tracts. None of the 10 intersections where red-light cameras issued the fewest tickets are near expressways, and just one is in a majority Black tract.

Sutton and Tilahun also found that ticketing levels are highest among red-light cameras located within 350 feet of freeways, and that Black neighborhoods account for a disproportionate share of all cameras near freeways, according to the executive summary of their paper.

The UIC researchers also found that red-light cameras in areas where there were high rates of violent crime issued more tickets. “Perhaps people drive differently in those areas,” Tilahun said. “They might rush through intersections because they feel unsafe.”

Census estimates show that Black residents are about as likely to drive to work as white residents, though they face longer commutes no matter how they get to work, according to a study by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which works on planning issues in northeastern Illinois.

Low-income Black neighborhoods often lack basic amenities such as grocery stores, pharmacies and hospitals, forcing drivers into their cars for longer periods of time, said Alejo Alvarado, a transportation planner who [has written about](#) how replacing traffic stops with speed cameras could disproportionately hurt low-income and minority drivers in Oakland, California.

“There’s usually not retail investment or housing investment, so a lot of these communities, they’re food deserts. They don’t have the amenities they need,” Alvarado said. “I can’t just walk down the street to get my groceries; I’ve got to drive somewhere else.”

When Lightfoot was running for office in 2019, [she promised](#) to reform the city’s system of ticketing and debt collection. “We cannot accept a system that has such a devastating impact on low-income people and people of color,” she said.

The mayor has made good on her promise. The city ended a long-standing practice of seeking driver’s license suspensions for unpaid parking tickets, and state lawmakers ended suspensions for any kind of ticket debt, including for unpaid camera tickets. The city has also made ticket payment plans more accessible; it used to be cheaper for motorists with a lot of ticket debt to file for bankruptcy than to get on a payment plan with the city.

So when Lightfoot proposed an expansion of the city’s speed-camera program in October 2020, potentially sending tens of thousands of new tickets to the same populations already overburdened by fines and fees, it was widely seen as hypocritical. She was even criticized by some of the transportation safety advocates who support camera enforcement, including the influential Active Transportation Alliance.

Though the mayor made an argument for traffic safety, alliance spokesperson Kyle Whitehead said his group suspected the proposal was more about revenue given it was made in the context of the city budget. What’s more, he said, the change would be “exposing more people to tickets without really understanding the racial equity impact of that change.”

But Chicago officials did understand. When Lightfoot proposed the expansion, the city already had Sutton and Tilahun’s preliminary findings. Sutton was dismayed to learn of the expansion.

“There’s a disconnect between the data and the politics, the evidence and politics,” Sutton said of the change. “It doesn’t align with the huge burdens that we see in the data.”

Lurie defended the mayor’s decision to expand the program even though the city had evidence of its disparate impact on communities of color. Lightfoot, he said, was particularly motivated after a decade-high spike in traffic fatalities in 2020.

“If someone is a reckless driver, that is a fundamental concern to the mayor,” Lurie said. “That fine and fee, we believe, can help change behavior. That fine and fee should not put someone in a place where they are unable to pay it, where they are making choices about whether they could put food on the table instead of paying that fine or fee.”

The impact of lowering the speed limit threshold was huge. In 2021, the city issued more than 1.4 million tickets to motorists going 6 to 10 mph over the limit, more citations of that kind than it had issued in the combined previous eight years of the program’s existence. The tickets, if paid, had the potential to bring in some \$50 million in revenue.

But not everybody can pay their tickets, and the debt can upend lives. Late payments can lead to a boot being placed on a car, which might mean days away from work, making it harder to catch up with the debt. While unpaid tickets may no longer result in a license suspension, it’s easy for Chicagoans to get caught in the cycle.

“We end up fixing something and creating a different kind of harm,” said Priya Sarathy Jones, the national policy and campaigns director at the Fines and Fees Justice Center, which sees cameras playing a larger role in cities’ efforts to prevent traffic fatalities. “It removes police from having contact with predominantly Black men and Black people, but you’re also creating an entirely parallel universe of harm.”

Sutton, who has long studied the impact of “race neutral” policies on communities of color, said Chicago’s experience should be a cautionary tale for cities considering camera programs.

“It’s the same cycle, right, in terms of their interaction with the state and with the justice system,” Sutton said. “But the way you enter that is not through a police officer, but through this supposedly unbiased technology. ... I don’t think there’s a technological fix to an unjust system.”

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/11 Exposed: transportation industry credit info
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/transportation/report-breach-exposes-hundreds-of-thousands-of-transportation-industry-credit-records/
GIST	<p>Security researcher Jeremiah Fowler together with the Website Planet research team discovered a non-password protected database that contained 822,789 records. The dataset had detailed information on trucking, transport companies, and individual drivers. The data appeared to be connected to credit accounts, loans, repayment, and debt collections. This included banking information and tax ID numbers. Many of the Tax IDs were consistent with what appeared to be SSN (Social Security Numbers) and stored in plain text.</p> <p>Upon further research there were multiple references including internal emails and usernames of a Florida based company called TransCredit. The team immediately sent a responsible disclosure notice to TransCredit and public access was restricted shortly after. The records appeared to contain the data of trucking and transportation companies based in the United States and Canada.</p>

	According to their website: <i>TransCredit utilizes robust data from a large network of aging providers to create our reports. Our DISC and Premier Credit Reports are the most comprehensive industry-specific credit reports available, displaying a unique credit score and payment trends. We provide dependable credit reports that you can access quickly to make informed decisions.</i>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Ransomware attackers use Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/ransomware-warning-hackers-are-using-log4j-flaw-as-part-of-their-attacks-warns-microsoft/
GIST	<p>Microsoft has confirmed that suspected China-based cyber criminals are targeting the Log4j 'Log4Shell' flaw in VMware's Horizon product to install NightSky, a new ransomware strain that emerged on December 27.</p> <p>The financially motivated ransomware attacks target CVE-2021-44228, the original Log4Shell flaw disclosed on December 9, and mark one new threat posed by the critical vulnerability that affects internet-facing software, systems and devices where vulnerable versions of the Java-based Log4j application error-logging component are present.</p> <p>"As early as January 4, attackers started exploiting the CVE-2021-44228 vulnerability in internet-facing systems running VMware Horizon. Our investigation shows that successful intrusions in these campaigns led to the deployment of the NightSky ransomware," Microsoft notes in an update to its recommendations for mitigating Log4Shell.</p> <p>Microsoft's findings add more details to a report last week from the digital arm of the UK's National Health Service (NHS) that attackers are targeting VMware's Horizon server software that use vulnerable versions of Log4j. That report noted attackers installed a malicious Java file that injects a web shell into the VM Blast Secure Gateway service, but it didn't indicate whether ransomware was deployed.</p> <p>Horizon is one of a number of VMware's software products affected by Log4j flaws. The case demonstrates the difficulties admins face in identifying systems affected by Log4j. VMware has detailed which versions of Horizon components are or are not vulnerable, and the different remediation steps for each if they are vulnerable.</p> <p>Its advisory indicates that at least one version of each Horizon on-premise component is vulnerable. Vulnerable on-premise components include Connection Server and HTML Access, the Horizon Windows Agent, Linux Agent, Linux Agent Direct Connect, Cloud Connector, and vRealize Operations for Desktop Agent. VMware has released updated versions or provided scripted mitigation workarounds.</p> <p>Microsoft says the attacks are being performed by a China-based ransomware operator it's tracking as DEV-0401, which has previously deployed LockFile, AtomSilo, and Rook. The group has also exploited internet-facing systems running Confluence (CVE-2021-26084) and on-premises Exchange servers (CVE-2021-34473), according to Microsoft.</p> <p>According to BleepingComputer, malware researchers at MalwareHunterTeam identified NightSky as a new ransomware group on December 27.</p> <p>However, Czech-based malware analyst Jiří Vinopal, who published an analysis of NightSky on GitHub today, argues NightSky is just a new version of Rook ransomware with a few key design and encryption changes, including that NightSky is delivered as a VMProtect file.</p> <p>BleepingComputer notes that NightSky is using "double extortion", where the attacker not only encrypts a target's data but steals it and threatens to leak it if a ransom is not paid. One victim received an \$800,000 ransom demand for a NightSky decryptor.</p>

[As ZDNet reported](#) yesterday, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) on Monday said it had not seen Log4Shell exploitation result in significant intrusions beyond the attack on the Belgian Defense Ministry.

However, it also warned the lack of significant intrusions was no reason to reduce the urgency of remediation.

Attackers who have already exploited targets can lay low for months afterwards, waiting for defenders to drop their guard before moving on their new access.

And big penalties might await firms that don't apply available patches if vulnerable systems expose consumer data. The FTC [last week warned](#) it would come after private sector firms that failed to protect consumer data exposed as a result of Log4j.

CISA's assessment that the Log4j threat is far from over chimes with Microsoft's assessment, which stresses that Log4j is a "high-risk situation" in part because many organizations can't easily tell what products and services are affected by Log4j.

Microsoft said the Log4j vulnerabilities represent a complex and high-risk situation for companies across the globe: "The vulnerabilities affect not only applications that use vulnerable libraries, but also any services that use these applications, so customers may not readily know how widespread the issue is in their environment."

Microsoft also said customers should use scripts and scanning tools to assess their risk and impact, but warns that it has seen attackers using many of the same inventory techniques to locate targets: "Sophisticated adversaries (like nation-state actors) and commodity attackers alike have been observed taking advantage of these vulnerabilities. There is high potential for the expanded use of the vulnerabilities."

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HEADLINE	01/11 'Fully undetected' SysJoker malware
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/undetected-sysjoker-backdoor-malwarewindows-linux-macos/177532/
GIST	<p>A brand-new multiplatform malware, likely distributed via malicious npm packages, is spreading under the radar with Linux and Mac versions going fully undetected in VirusTotal, researchers warned.</p> <p>The Windows version, according to a Tuesday writeup from Intezer, has only six detections as of this writing. These were uploaded to VirusTotal with the suffix ".ts," which is used for TypeScript files.</p> <p>Dubbed SysJoker by Intezer, the backdoor is used for establishing initial access on a target machine. Once installed, it can execute follow-on code as well as additional commands, through which malicious actors can carry out follow-on attacks or pivot to move further into a corporate network. This kind of initial access is also a hot commodity on underground cyberforums, where ransomware groups and others can purchase it.</p> <p>It was first seen in December during a cyberattack on a Linux-based web server of a "leading educational institution," researchers said. Looking at its command-and-control (C2) domain registration and other sample data, this trickster appears to have been cooked up in the second half of 2021, they added.</p> <p>A possible attack vector for SysJoker is an infected npm package, according to Intezer's analysis – an increasingly popular vector for dropping malware on targets. Npm and other public code repositories are centralized developer communities where coders can upload and download building blocks for building applications. If one of these building blocks is malicious, it can be pulled into any number of apps, ready to strike any users of those infected projects.</p> <p>SysJoker's Infection Routine</p>

Once it finds a target, SysJoker masquerades as a system update, researchers said, to avoid suspicion. Meanwhile, it generates its C2 by decoding a string retrieved from a text file hosted on Google Drive.

“During our analysis the C2 has changed three times, indicating the attacker is active and monitoring infected machines,” researchers noted in the report. “Based on victimology and malware’s behavior, we assess that SysJoker is after specific targets.”

SysJoker’s behavior is similar for all three operating systems, according to Intezer, with the exception that the Windows version makes use of a first-stage dropper.

After execution, SysJoker sleeps for a random amount of time, between a minute and a half and two minutes. Then, it will create the C:\ProgramData\SystemData\ directory and copy itself there using the file name “igfxCUIService.exe” – in other words, it masquerades as the Intel Graphics Common User Interface Service.

After gathering system information (mac address, user name, physical media serial number and IP address), it collects the data into a temporary text file.

“These text files are deleted immediately, stored in a JSON object and then encoded and written to a file named ‘microsoft_Windows.dll,’” researchers noted.

SysJoker will then establish persistence by adding an entry to the registry run key “HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run.” Between each of these stages of infection, it sleeps for a random period of time.

Establishing C2 Communication

To establish a connection with the C2, SysJoker first decodes a hardcoded Google Drive link using a hardcoded XOR key, researchers observed. It uses the same key to encrypt information sent back and forth to and from the C2, they added.

That Google Drive link opens a text file named “domain.txt” that holds an encoded C2 (the address changes dynamically according to server availability). The link decodes the C2 and sends the previously collected machine fingerprinting data over, according to the analysis. The C2 replies with a unique token – an identifier for that particular infection that it will use to ping the C2 for instructions.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Florida Digestive Health data compromise
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/breach/213k-florida-digestive-health-patients-informed-of-2020-data-compromise
GIST	<p>Florida Digestive Health Specialists recently notified 212,509 patients that their data was potentially compromised one year ago, during the hack of multiple employee email accounts.</p> <p>First discovered on Dec. 16 2020, an employee reported suspicious activity within their FDHS email account, stemming from a number of emails being sent that were not generated by the user. Five days later, FDHS company funds were rerouted to an unknown bank account, which prompted an investigation.</p> <p>The investigators found that multiple employee email accounts were accessed during the email hack and began a forensic analysis to determine what information was stored in the accounts. The electronic health record system was not affected by the incident.</p> <p>The compromised health information included full names, Social Security numbers, financial information, contact details, medical data, health insurance information and individual policy numbers, diagnoses, and Medicare or Medicaid data. Investigators found no evidence any health information was accessed or downloaded, but it could not be ruled out.</p>

	<p>All impacted individuals will receive a year of free credit monitoring and identity restoration services. FDHS has since reset all user passwords, enabled multi-factor authentication for its IT systems, deployed additional security controls, bolstered password protocols, and reconfigured the firewall.</p> <p>The concern with the FDHS notice is that the initial access to the email accounts occurred more than a year ago.</p> <p>Under The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, covered entities and relevant business associates are required to notify patients of protected health information breaches impacting more than 500 patients within 60 days of discovery — not at the close of an investigation.</p> <p>While forensic analyses of email compromises are notoriously time consuming, numerous providers have demonstrated effective ways of remaining compliant with the HIPAA-required timeline during ongoing investigations. Most commonly, the initial breach can be reported as impacting 500 within 60 days, then a secondary notice can provide the updated information.</p> <p>The FDHS notice is not clear as to whether the data compromise was discovered until the close of the investigation, which could account for the timing issue. Officials noted the investigation into the account contents “took a considerable amount of time and only concluded on Nov. 19, 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 ‘Great resignation’ to ‘great exfiltration’
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/great-resignation-comes-great-exfiltration
GIST	<p>As business has moved to the cloud, so has crime. Cloud apps are now the primary source of malware downloads. In 2020, 46% of malware came from the cloud. This rose to 66% in Q4 2021 (peaking at 73% during the year).</p> <p>The reason is simple – it is cheap and easy to host malware in cloud apps, and users have an inherent trust in well-known names like Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive and Box. The criminal simply opens an account, uploads a malicious document to the account, and then uses social engineering and phishing techniques to persuade potential victims to download the document.</p> <p>In its Cloud and Threat Report, January 2022 (PDF download), Netskope notes that Google Drive has replaced OneDrive as the primary source for malware hosting. There is no apparent reason for this change beyond the cyclical nature of criminal behavior. “We don’t yet know which cloud app will prove most popular in 2022,” Ray Canzanese, Netskope’s threat research director told SecurityWeek, “but we can be almost certain it won’t still be Google Drive.” He noted that the number of cloud apps with malware downloads has increased from 91 to 230.</p> <p>The figures come from the telemetry of a subset of users of the Netskope Cloud Security platform, which is used to protect millions of users around the world.</p> <p>Thirty-seven percent (up from 19%) of malware downloads are now associated with Microsoft Office documents. This began with the Emotet malspam campaign in Q2 2020 and copycat attackers have continued the growth for the last six quarters – with no sign of a slowdown.</p> <p>Apart from malware downloads, cloud apps are also subject to a high number of credential stuffing attacks where criminals seek to access stored confidential data. The quantity of such attacks during 2021 has not varied significantly from 2020, but the sources have changed. In 2020, Thailand was the most popular geographic source for credential stuffing attacks at 18%. In 2021, Thailand was replaced by the U.S.A. (19%), with Thailand dropping to sixth position at just 3%. The reason may simply be indicative of an increasing number of compromised systems in the U.S.</p> <p>Canzanese told <i>SecurityWeek</i> that the attacks themselves are largely unsophisticated, with the attackers simply testing out the most common passwords.</p>

	<p>One side-effect discovery from the research is that the current Great Resignation (GR) phenomenon is accompanied by a Great Exfiltration process. Whatever the precise reason for the GR – whether it’s a work/life revaluation allowed by lockdown timeouts, or the realization of many more opportunities resulting from the growth in remote working – its reality remains. More people are leaving their jobs and moving on.</p> <p>“In 2021, attrition doubled,” says the report, “with 8% of employees leaving their jobs, compared to 4% in 2020.” It’s a double whammy for business – not only are they losing staff, but the leavers are taking corporate data with them. In the final 30 days of employment, leavers have been downloading far more data than usual. During this period, 29% of leavers downloaded more data, and 15% uploaded more data to personal cloud apps.</p> <p>“Of the users who uploaded more files to personal apps in their final 30 days,” says the report, “half uploaded more than 5x their normal data volume, 8% uploaded more than 100x their usual data volume, and 1% uploaded more than 1000x their baseline,” This cannot be co-incidental, and indicates a significant and deliberate movement of company data into personal accounts prior to leaving the company.</p> <p>“The increasing popularity of cloud apps has given rise to three types of abuse,” summarizes Canzanese: “attackers trying to gain access to victim cloud apps, attackers abusing cloud apps to deliver malware, and insiders using cloud apps for data exfiltration.” It is, he continued, “a reminder that the same apps that you use for legitimate purposes will be attacked and abused.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Healthcare data management firm hack
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/hackers-hit-healthcare-data-co/
GIST	<p>The protected health information (PHI) of thousands of individuals may have been exposed in a hacking incident at a healthcare information management company based in Georgia.</p> <p>Clinical or treatment information and social security numbers were among the sensitive data compromised during a successful cyber-attack on Ciox Health last summer.</p> <p>Ciox Health, headquartered in Alpharetta, provides various services, including information release, medical record retrieval and health information management to more than 30 healthcare providers.</p> <p>According to a notice recently issued by Ciox Health, an unauthorized person accessed the email account of a Ciox employee between June 24 2021 and July 2 2021.</p> <p>The company warned that the threat actor may have used that access to download emails and attachments associated with the compromised account.</p> <p>“Ciox reviewed the account’s contents to determine whether sensitive information was contained in the account,” said the notice.</p> <p>“On September 24 2021, Ciox learned that some emails and attachments in the employee’s email account contained limited patient information related to Ciox billing inquiries and/or other customer service requests.”</p> <p>Information that the attacker may have accessed included patient names, provider names, dates of birth and/or dates of service. Social security numbers or driver’s license numbers, health insurance information and/or clinical or treatment information were also exposed in what Ciox described as “very limited instances.”</p> <p>The data breach was reported to the US Department of Health and Human Services’ Office for Civil Rights on December 30 as a hacking/IT incident impacting 12,493 individuals.</p>

	<p>Ciox Health said it began notifying its healthcare provider customers of the security incident on November 23. The security notice published on Ciox Health’s website was issued on behalf of 32 different healthcare providers, including Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, Indiana University Health, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center Health System and Sarasota County Public Hospital District d/b/a Sarasota Memorial Health Care System.</p> <p>“To help prevent something like this from happening again, we have and will continue to identify opportunities to implement additional procedures to further strengthen our email security, including by providing enhanced cybersecurity training to our employees,” stated Ciox Health.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 CISA: ancient bugs still being exploited
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/cisa-alerts-federal-agencies-of-ancient-bugs-still-being-exploited/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has updated its list of known exploited vulnerabilities with 15 new security issues that serve as a frequent attack vector against federal enterprises.</p> <p>The latest additions vary in terms of severity and disclosure date, some of them being rated as medium risks while others are as old as 2013.</p> <p>In combination with other factors such as a threat actor’s foothold on the network, old and unpatched devices, and/or device exposure on the public internet, the vulnerabilities are a serious security gap and an opportunity for adversaries.</p> <p>Ancient bugs on the list</p> <p>CISA compiled the new list after finding evidence that the security issues newly added to the Catalog of Known Exploited Vulnerabilities are used in ongoing attacks.</p> <p>Of the 15 entries, only four are more recent, from 2021 and another from 2020. The rest are more than two years old, the oldest of them from 2013 - a bug in the WinVerifyTrust function tracked as CVE-2013-3900, which affects Windows versions starting XP SP2 to Server 2012.</p> <p>Another aged vulnerability is from 2015, a remote code execution in IBM WebSphere Application Server and Server Hy Server Hypervisor Edition, identified as CVE-2015-7450 and rated as critical (severity level 9.8 out of 10).</p> <p>The table below shows all the vulnerabilities that CISA wants federal agencies to remediate this month to boost defenses against active threats. CISA recommends applying available updates as per vendor instructions.</p>

CVE identifier	Description	Remediate date
CVE-2021-22017	VMware vCenter Server Improper Access Control Vulnerability	1/24/2022
CVE-2021-36260	Hikvision Improper Input Validation Vulnerability	1/24/2022
CVE-2021-27860	FatPipe WARP, IPVPN, and MPVPN Privilege Escalation vulnerability	1/24/2022
CVE-2020-6572	Google Chrome prior to 81.0.4044.92 Use-After-Free Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-1458	Microsoft Win32K Elevation of Privilege Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-7609	Elastic Kibana Remote Code Execution Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-2725	Oracle WebLogic Server, Injection Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-9670	Synacor Zimbra Collaboration Suite Improper Restriction of XML External Entity Reference Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-10149	Exim Mail Transfer Agent (MTA) Improper Input Validation Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2019-1579	Palo Alto Networks PAN-OS Remote Code Execution Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2018-13383	Fortinet FortiOS and FortiProxy Improper Authorization Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2018-13382	Fortinet FortiOS and FortiProxy Improper Authorization Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2017-1000486	Primetek Primefaces Application Remote Code Execution Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2015-7450	IBM WebSphere Application Server and Server Hy Server Hypervisor Edition Remote Code Execution Vulnerability	7/10/2021
CVE-2013-3900	Elastic Kibana Remote Code Execution Vulnerability	7/10/2021
<p>CISA's catalog of known exploited vulnerabilities is part of the Binding Operational Directive (BOD) 22-01 for reducing security risks and for better vulnerability management.</p> <p>Under this directive, federal civilian agencies have to identify in their systems the security issues listed in the catalog, and to remediate them.</p> <p>Although the catalog is aimed mainly at federal civilian agencies, it is a good reference for organizations of all types to reduce their exposure to cyber risks.</p>		
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HEADLINE	01/11 APT35 PowerShell backdoor Log4j attacks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/state-hackers-use-new-powershell-backdoor-in-log4j-attacks/
GIST	<p>Hackers believed to be part of the Iranian APT35 state-backed group (aka 'Charming Kitten' or 'Phosphorus') has been observed leveraging Log4Shell attacks to drop a new PowerShell backdoor.</p> <p>The modular payload can handle C2 communications, perform system enumeration, and eventually receive, decrypt, and load additional modules.</p> <p>Log4Shell is an exploit for CVE-2021-44228, a critical remote code execution vulnerability in Apache Log4j disclosed in December.</p> <p>According to researchers from Check Point, APT35 was among the first to leverage the vulnerability before targets had an opportunity to apply security updates, scanning for vulnerable systems mere days after its public disclosure.</p>

Check Point, who has been following these attempts, attributes the exploit activity to APT35 as the threat actor's attacks were hastily set up using previously exposed infrastructure known to be used by the group. However, as part of their research, the analysts also spotted something new in the form of a PowerShell modular backdoor named 'CharmPower.'

A modular backdoor for multiple tasks

The exploitation of CVE-2021-44228 results in running a PowerShell command with a base64-encoded payload, eventually fetching the 'CharmPower' module from an actor-controlled Amazon S3 bucket.

This core module can perform the following main functions:

- **Validate network connection** – Upon execution, the script waits for an active internet connection by making HTTP POST requests to google.com with the parameter hi=hi.
- **Basic system enumeration** – The script collects the Windows OS version, computer name, and the contents of a file Ni.txt in \$APPDATA path; the file is presumably created and filled by different modules that will be downloaded by the main module.
- **Retrieve C&C domain** – The malware decodes the C&C domain retrieved from a hardcoded URL hxxps://s3[.]amazonaws[.]com/doclibrarysales/3 located in the same S3 bucket from where the backdoor was downloaded.
- **Receive, decrypt, and execute follow-up modules.**

The core module keeps sending HTTP POST requests to the C2 that either go unanswered or receive a Base64 string which initiates the downloading of an additional PowerShell or C# module.

'CharmPower' is responsible for decrypting and loading these modules, and these then establish an independent channel of communication with the C2.

The list of modules to be sent to the infected endpoint is generated automatically based on the basic system data retrieved by CharmPower during the reconnaissance phase.

The additional modules sent by the C2 are the following:

- **Applications** – Enumerates uninstall registry values and uses the "wmic" command to figure out which applications are installed on the infected system.
- **Screenshot** – Captures screenshots according to a specified frequency and uploads them to an FTP server using hardcoded credentials.
- **Process** – Grabs running processes by using the tasklist command.
- **System information** – Runs the "systeminfo" command to gather system information. Has many more commands but are commented out.
- **Command Execution** – Remote command execution module featuring Invoke-Expression, cmd, and PowerShell options.
- **Cleanup** – Module to remove all traces left in the compromised system, like registry and startup folder entries, files, and processes. It's dropped at the very end of the APT35 attacks.

Similarities with old backdoors

[Check Point](#) noticed similarities between 'CharmPower' and an Android spyware used by APT35 in the past, including implementing the same logging functions and using an identical format and syntax. Also, the "Stack=Overflow" parameter in C2 communications is seen on both samples, which is a unique element only seen in APT35 tools.

These code similarities and infrastructure overlaps allowed Check Point to attribute the campaign to APT35.

'CharmPower' is an example of how quickly sophisticated actors can respond to the emergence of vulnerabilities like CVE-2021-44228 and put together code from previously exposed tools to create something potent and effective that can go past security and detection layers.

HEADLINE	01/12 NKorea hackers target Russia diplomats
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/hackers-take-over-diplomats-email-target-russian-deputy-minister/
GIST	<p>Hackers believed to work for the North Korean government have compromised the email account of a staff member of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) and deployed spear-phishing attacks against the country's diplomats in other regions.</p> <p>One of the targets was Sergey Alexeyevich Ryabko, the deputy foreign minister for the Russian Federation, among other things responsible for bilateral relations with North and South America.</p> <p>The phishing campaign started since at least October 19, 2021, deploying Konni malware, a remote administration tool (RAT) associated with the cyber activity from North Korean hackers known as APT37 (or StarCraft, Group123, Operation Erebus, and Operation Daybreak).</p> <p>Russian diplomatic targets</p> <p>Cybersecurity firm Cluster25 last week published research about a phishing campaign towards the end of December 2021 that delivered Konni RAT to individuals in the Russian diplomatic apparatus.</p> <p>The researchers found that the hackers used the New Year theme as a decoy in emails to staff at the Russian embassy in Indonesia.</p> <p>It was a congratulatory message that appeared to be from fellow diplomats at the Russian embassy in Serbia sending a ZIP archive with a holiday screensaver.</p> <p>When extracted, the file was an executable that ultimately delivered the Konni RAT disguised as Windows service "scrnsvc.dll."</p> <p>Researchers at Lumen's Black Lotus Labs were also tracking these spear-phishing campaigns that had started at least two months earlier, the likely goal being to harvest credentials of an active MID account.</p> <p>To achieve their objective, the attackers relied on spoofed hostnames for email services common in Russia, Mail.ru and Yandex.</p> <p>Another campaign started around November 7, delivering URLs for downloading an archive with documents asking for information on the vaccination status.</p> <p>The archive also included an executable posing as legitimate software used for checking the Covid-19 vaccination status, which executed a malware loader that infected the system with Konni.</p> <p>According to Black Lotus Labs researchers, the campaign in December also spotted by Cluster25 was the third one from the same threat actor and used the compromised MID account "mskhlystova@mid[.]ru" to send out malicious emails.</p> <p>The recipients of the malicious messages were the Russian embassy in Indonesia and Russian politician Sergey Alexeyevich Ryabkov, currently serving as Deputy Foreign Minister.</p> <p>Looking at the email headers revealed that the source of the messages was the same IP address, 152.89.247[.]26, used for the phishing campaign in October, Black Lotus Labs found.</p> <p>Technical analysis of the infection chain from Lumen's researchers confirmed Cluster25's findings, including the evasion technique of hiding a payload in a "401 unauthorized" server error response.</p> <p>Black Lotus Labs researchers say that this was a highly targeted campaign that "downloaded a first-stage agent which is nearly identical to the agent" discovered by Malwarebytes in a Konni attack against Russian targets.</p>

	Both cybersecurity outfits are confident in attributing the spear-phishing campaigns against the Russian diplomatic entities to the Konni advanced persistent threat.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Phishing actors take over FIFA 22 accounts
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ea-50-high-profile-fifa-22-accounts-taken-over-by-phishing-actors/
GIST	<p>Electronic Arts (EA) has published an official response to numerous reports about hacked player accounts, confirming the problem and attributing it to phishing actors.</p> <p>As the notice explains, hackers used social engineering against EA's customer experience team to bypass two-factor authentication and take over 50 player accounts.</p> <p>FIFA 22 is a very popular football (soccer) simulation game featuring a multi-player mode where people can compete in real-time, trade in-game items, etc.</p> <p>The gaming company has promised to restore rightful owners' access to the compromised accounts and has also announced the following measures to prevent this from happening again in the future:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All EA Advisors and individuals who assist with service of EA Accounts are receiving individualized re-training and additional team training, with a specific emphasis on account security practices and the phishing techniques used in this particular instance. • Implementation of additional steps to the account ownership verification process, such as mandatory managerial approval for all email change requests. • The customer experience software will be updated to better identify suspicious activity, flag at-risk accounts, and further limit the potential for human error in the account update process. <p>The above changes will inevitably make customer service more cumbersome and slow, but they will improve account security, something that the FIFA community has been complaining about for years.</p> <p>"We'd like to apologize for the inconvenience and frustration that this has caused, and that we were unable to share additional details in our original communication last week as we conducted a thorough investigation." concludes EA's statement</p> <p>High-profile accounts hacked</p> <p>The accounts that were targeted by the phishing actors include those of real footballers like Valentin Rosier, professional streamers, and in-game currency traders.</p> <p>These high-profile accounts have invested significant amounts of money in the game and use it as a source of income by monetizing their presence in that virtual space.</p> <p>Some of the hacked account holders point out the possibility of EA's staff giving away their personal data to the hackers, which would violate the GDPR, incurring fines up to 4% of EA's annual turnover.</p> <p>However, at this time, no data protection probes have been announced, and EA's investigation on the incident is still ongoing, so the scope of the impact hasn't been determined with certainty yet.</p> <p>It is also worth noting that Bleeping Computer has seen reports of lower-tier FIFA 22 accounts having been hacked recently, so the number of accounts taken over by phishing actors may be much greater than 50.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Russia cyber threat to critical infrastructure
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/fbi-nsa-cisa

GIST	<p>At a time when US-Russian diplomatic tensions are high amid another round of talks on security concerns between the nations recently concluding, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), FBI, and National Security Agency today released a joint advisory on how to detect, respond to, and mitigate cyberattacks from Russian state-sponsored hacking groups.</p> <p>The three agencies urged the cybersecurity community and critical infrastructure organizations to take on "a heightened state of awareness" to the threat of attacks from Russia by employing threat hunting and applying mitigations detailed in the advisory.</p> <p>Critical infrastructure organizations should "immediately" patch all of their computer systems, the advisory said, especially ones with vulnerabilities that have known exploits; deploy multifactor authentication; run anti-malware tools; and establish reporting process for incident response.</p>
Return to Top	Read the full advisory here .

HEADLINE	01/11 Medical Review Institute of America breach
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/mrioa-discloses-data-breach-affecting-134000-people?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Medical Review Institute of America (MRIOA) on Friday started notifying some individuals that their personal information was compromised in a cyberattack.</p> <p>The incident, MRIOA says, was discovered on November 9, 2021. A couple of days later, the organization discovered that personal information was compromised in the attack and, by November 16, it had managed to retrieve it.</p> <p>The investigation into the incident has revealed the theft of protected health information such as names, gender, physical and email addresses, phone numbers, birth dates, Social Security numbers, full clinical information (including diagnosis, treatment, medical history, and lab test results), and financial information (such as health insurance policy and group plan number).</p> <p>MRIOA says it has taken steps to strengthen its security. It has implemented additional multifactor authentication protections, replaced its servers with new ones and deployed a hardened backup environment, revised its cybersecurity policies, and enhanced employee training.</p> <p>In a data breach notification submitted to the Maine Attorney General's Office, MRIOA said that over 134,000 individuals were impacted by the incident.</p> <p>The organization has not shared any information on the type of cyberattack it fell victim to. However, it did say that, immediately after the incident, it "took steps to secure and safely restore its systems and operations," which suggests that ransomware might have been involved.</p> <p>Furthermore, the organization said it "retrieved and subsequently confirmed the deletion of" the stolen data, which suggests that MRIOA contacted the attackers and negotiated with them.</p> <p><i>SecurityWeek</i> has emailed MRIOA to confirm that ransomware was indeed involved in the incident and to ask whether a ransom was paid, but has yet to receive a response.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 New RedLine as fake omicron stat counter
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/new-redline-malware-version-spread-as-fake-omicron-stat-counter/?&web_view=true
GIST	A new variant of the RedLine info-stealer is distributed via emails using a fake COVID-19 Omicron stat counter app as a lure.

RedLine is a widespread commodity malware sold to cyber-criminals for a couple of hundred USD. It [supplies dark web markets](#) with over half of the stolen user credentials sold to other threat actors.

The malware is actively developed and continually improved with widespread deployment using [multiple distribution methods](#).

RedLine targets [user account credentials](#) stored on the browser, VPN passwords, credit card details, cookies, IM content, FTP credentials, cryptocurrency wallet data, and system information.

The most recent variant was spotted by analysts at Fortinet, who noticed several new features and improvements on top of an already information-stealing functionality.

Targeting additional data

The new variant has added some more information points to exfiltrate, such as:

- Graphics card name
- BIOS manufacturer, identification code, serial number, release date, and version
- Disk drive manufacturer, model, total heads, and signature
- Processor (CPU) information like unique ID, processor ID, manufacturer, name, max clock speed, and motherboard information

This data is fetched upon the first execution of the "Omicron Stats.exe" lure, which unpacks the malware and injects it into vbc.exe.

The additional apps targeted by the new RedLine variant are the Opera GX web browser, OpenVPN, and ProtonVPN.

Previous versions of RedLine targeted regular Opera, but the GX is a special "gamer-focused" edition growing in popularity.

Moreover, the malware now searches Telegram folders to locate images and conversation histories and send them back to the threat actor's servers.

Finally, local Discord resources are more vigorously inspected to discover and steal access tokens, logs, and database files.

Campaign characteristics

While analyzing the new campaign, researchers found an IP address in Great Britain communicating with the command and control server via the Telegram messaging service.

The victims are spread across 12 countries, and the attack doesn't focus on specific organizations or individuals.

"This variant uses 207[.]32.217.89 as its C2 server through port 14588. This IP is owned by 1gservers," explains the [Fortinet report](#)

"Over the course of the few weeks after this variant was released, we noticed one IP address (149[.]154.167.91) in particular communicating with this C2 server."

As this is a new version of RedLine, we will likely see other threat actors adopt its use soon.

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HEADLINE	01/12 How safe are cloud applications?
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/12/cloud-delivered-malware/?web_view=true
GIST	Netskope released a research highlighting the continued growth of malware and other malicious payloads delivered by cloud applications . The year-over-year analysis identifies the top trends in cloud attacker

activities and cloud data risks from 2021 as compared to 2020, and examines changes in the malware landscape throughout 2021, highlighting that attackers are achieving more success delivering malware payloads to their victims and offering advice for improving security posture in 2022.

The research showed that more than two-thirds of malware downloads came from cloud apps in 2021 and identified Google Drive as the app with the most malware downloads, taking the spot from Microsoft OneDrive. The research also uncovered an increase in malicious Office documents from 19% to 37% of all malware downloads, all pointing to a rise in cloud application security risks. The report further shows that more than half of all managed cloud app instances are targeted by credential attacks.

As the workforce becomes more distributed and stretches the limits of network and data security, organizations must apply modern security controls, such as [Security Service Edge](#) (SSE)-led architectures, to enable users the freedom to securely move about the cloud.

The prevalence of malware delivered by cloud applications

- **Cloud-delivered malware is now more prevalent than web-delivered malware.** In 2021, malware downloads originating from cloud apps increased to 66% of all malware downloads when compared to traditional websites, up from 46% at the beginning of 2020.
- **Google Drive emerges as the top app for most malware downloads.** Research found that Google Drive now accounts for the most malware downloads in 2021, taking over the top spot from Microsoft OneDrive.
- **Cloud-delivered malware via Microsoft Office nearly doubled from 2020 to 2021.** Malicious Microsoft Office documents increased to 37% of all malware downloads at the end of 2021 compared to 19% at the beginning of 2020, as attackers continue to use weaponized Office Documents to gain an initial foothold on target systems. The Emotet malspam campaign in Q2 2020 kicked off a spike in malicious Microsoft Office documents that copycat attackers have sustained over the past six quarters, with no signs of slowing down.
- **More than half of managed cloud app instances are targeted by credential attacks.** Attackers constantly try common passwords and leaked credentials from other services to gain access to sensitive information stored in cloud apps. While the overall level of attacks remained consistent, the sources of the attacks shifted significantly, with 98% of attacks coming from new IP addresses.
- **Corporate data exfiltration is on the rise.** One out of seven [employees takes data with them](#) when they leave their employer, using personal app instances. Between 2020 and 2021, an average of 29% of departing employees downloaded more files from managed corporate app instances, and 15% of users uploaded more files to personal app instances in their final 30 days.

“The increasing popularity of cloud apps has given rise to three types of abuse described in this report: attackers trying to gain access to victim cloud apps, attackers abusing cloud apps to deliver malware, and insiders using cloud apps for data exfiltration,” said [Ray Canzanese](#), Threat Research Director, [Netskope](#) Threat Labs.

“The report serves as a reminder that the same apps that you use for legitimate purposes will be attacked and abused. Locking down cloud apps can help to prevent attackers from infiltrating them, while scanning for incoming threats and outgoing data can help block malware downloads and data exfiltration.”

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HEADLINE	01/11 WEF: cyber risks add to climate threat
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/world-economic-forum-warns-cyber-risks-add-to-climate-threat/2022/01/11/ab78e402-72c1-11ec-a26d-1c21c16b1c93_story.html
GIST	LONDON — Cyberthreats and the growing space race are emerging risks to the global economy, adding to existing challenges posed by climate change and the coronavirus pandemic , the World Economic Forum said in a report Tuesday.

The [Global Risks Report](#) is usually released ahead of the annual elite winter gathering of CEOs and world leaders in the Swiss ski resort of Davos, but the [event has been postponed](#) for a second year in a row because of COVID-19. The World Economic Forum still plans some virtual sessions next week.

Here's a rundown of the report, which is based on a survey of about 1,000 experts and leaders:

WORLD OUTLOOK

As 2022 begins, the pandemic and its economic and societal impact still pose a “critical threat” to the world, the report said. Big differences between [rich and poor nations' access to vaccines](#) mean their economies are recovering at uneven rates, which could widen social divisions and heighten geopolitical tensions.

By 2024, the global economy is forecast to be 2.3% smaller than it would have been without the pandemic. But that masks the different rates of growth between developing nations, whose economies are forecast to be 5.5% smaller than before the pandemic, and rich countries, which are expected to expand 0.9%.

DIGITAL DANGERS

The pandemic forced a huge shift — requiring many people to work or attend class from home and giving rise to an exploding number of online platforms and devices to aid a transformation that has dramatically increased security risks, the report said.

“We’re at the point now where cyberthreats are growing faster than our ability to effectively prevent and manage them,” said Carolina Klint, a risk management leader at Marsh, whose parent company Marsh McLennan co-authored the report with Zurich Insurance Group and SK Group.

[Cyberattacks are becoming more aggressive](#) and widespread, as criminals use tougher tactics to go after more vulnerable targets, the report said. Malware and [ransomware attacks have boomed](#), while the rise of cryptocurrencies makes it easy for online criminals to hide payments they have collected.

While those responding to the survey cited cybersecurity threats as a short- and medium-term risk, Klint said the report’s authors were concerned that the issue wasn’t ranked higher, suggesting it’s a “blind spot” for companies and governments.

SPACE RACE

Space is the final frontier — for risk.

Falling costs for launch technology has led to a new space race between companies and governments. Last year, [Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' space tourism](#) venture Blue Origin and [Virgin Galactic's Richard Branson](#) took off, while [Elon Musk's Space X](#) business made big gains in launching astronauts and satellites.

Meanwhile, a host of countries are beefing up their space programs as they chase geopolitical and military power or scientific and commercial gains, the report said.

But all these programs raise the risk of frictions in orbit.

“Increased exploitation of these orbits carries the risk of congestion, an increase in debris and the possibility of collisions in a realm with few governance structures to mitigate new threats,” the report said.

Space exploitation is one of the areas that respondents thought had among the least amount of international collaboration to deal with the challenges.

	<p>Experts and leaders responding to the survey “don’t believe that much is being done in the best possible way moving forward,” World Economic Forum’s managing director, Saadia Zahidi, said at a virtual press briefing from Geneva.</p> <p>Other areas include artificial intelligence, cyberattacks and migration and refugees, she said.</p> <p>CLIMATE CRISIS</p> <p>The environment remains the biggest long-term worry.</p> <p>The planet’s health over the next decade is the dominant concern, according to survey respondents, who cited failure to act on climate change, extreme weather, and loss of biodiversity as the top three risks.</p> <p>The report noted that different countries are taking different approaches, with some moving faster to adopt a zero-carbon model than others. Both approaches come with downsides. While moving slowly could radicalize more people who think the government isn’t acting urgently, a faster shift away from carbon intense industries could spark economic turmoil and throw millions out of work.</p> <p>“Adopting hasty environmental policies could also have unintended consequences for nature,” the report added. “There are still many unknown risks from deploying untested biotechnical and geoengineering technologies.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Celebrities’ cryptocurrency promotion suit
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/kim-kardashian-floyd-mayweather-jr-others-sued-over-cryptocurrency-promotion-11641946154?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	<p>Kim Kardashian, Floyd Mayweather Jr. , and Paul Pierce are among a number of celebrities being sued for allegedly leading investors into a cryptocurrency “pump and dump” scam.</p> <p>The celebrities and other defendants are accused of making “false or misleading statements to investors about EthereumMax through social media advertisements and other promotional activities,” according to the class-action complaint filed last Friday in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California.</p> <p>In addition to the three celebrities, defendants include the co-founders of the company and others.</p> <p>The lawsuit alleges EthereumMax is a “speculative digital token created by a mysterious group of cryptocurrency developers.” It says the celebrities told their millions of social-media followers to buy the cryptocurrency, only to sell when the price was inflated.</p> <p>Ryan Huegerich, a New York resident, filed the complaint on behalf of himself and others who purchased EMAX tokens between May 14, 2021, and June 27, 2021, and lost money, according to the filing.</p> <p>EthereumMax disputed the allegations. “The deceptive narrative associated with the recent allegations is riddled with misinformation,” a company spokesman said.</p> <p>Representatives for Ms. Kardashian and Messrs. Mayweather and Pierce didn’t immediately respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>Mr. Mayweather promoted EthereumMax in 2021 when he was in a boxing match with YouTube celebrity Logan Paul. Former NBA player and sports commentator Paul Pierce promoted EthereumMax on his Twitter account during an unrelated conflict he was having with ESPN at the time.</p> <p>“.@espn I don’t need you. I got @ethereum_max I made more money with this crypto in the past month then [sic] I did with y’all in a year,” Mr. Pierce tweeted.</p>

Return to Top	<p>Ms. Kardashian promoted the cryptocurrency on Instagram, where she has 278 million followers. The reality TV star and entrepreneur’s 2021 post asking her followers on the platform to join “the Ethereum Max Community” prompted criticism from the U.K.’s financial watchdog.</p> <p>Charles Randell, head of the U.K.’s Financial Conduct Authority, said in a speech in September that Ms. Kardashian’s post might “have been the financial promotion with the single biggest audience reach in history.” He also criticized the disclosed ad, saying Ms. Kardashian wasn’t required to tell followers that EthereumMax was a month-old, speculative digital token.</p> <p>“I can’t say whether this particular token is a scam,” Mr. Randell told the Cambridge International Symposium on Economic Crime, according to a copy of his remarks posted online. “But social media influencers are routinely paid by scammers to help them pump and dump new tokens on the back of pure speculation. Some influencers promote coins that turn out simply not to exist at all.”</p> <p>A representative for EthereumMax said at the time that Ms. Kardashian’s “post was simply intended to raise awareness of the project and its utility.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Group: YouTube major conduit of fake news
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jan/12/youtube-is-major-conduit-of-fake-news-factcheckers-say
GIST	<p>YouTube is a major conduit of online disinformation and misinformation worldwide and is not doing enough to tackle the spread of falsehoods on its platform, according to a global coalition of factchecking organisations.</p> <p>A letter signed by more than 80 groups, including Full Fact in the UK and the Washington Post’s Fact Checker, says the video platform is hosting content by groups including Doctors for the Truth, which spread Covid misinformation, and videos supporting the “fraud” narrative during the US presidential election.</p> <p>“YouTube is allowing its platform to be weaponised by unscrupulous actors to manipulate and exploit others, and to organise and fundraise themselves. Current measures are proving insufficient,” states the letter to YouTube’s chief executive, Susan Wojcicki, which describes YouTube as a “major conduit” for falsehoods.</p> <p>The letter urges YouTube, which is owned by Google, to make four changes to its operations: a commitment to funding independent research into disinformation campaigns on the platform; providing links to rebuttals inside videos distributing disinformation and misinformation; stopping its algorithms from promoting repeat offenders; and doing more to tackle falsehoods in non-English-language videos.</p> <p>“We hope you will consider implementing these ideas for the public good and to make YouTube a platform that truly does its best to prevent disinformation and misinformation being weaponized against its users and society at large,” the letter states.</p> <p>Disinformation is the deliberate distribution of false information that intends to cause harm, whereas misinformation is when false information is shared but no harm is meant.</p> <p>The letter from the factcheckers, who challenge claims made by domestic governments, online posts and media organisations, states that YouTube’s failure to tackle disinformation and misinformation is especially marked in the global south, a term that refers to nations in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, has referred repeatedly to concerns over safety controls in non-English language markets as a key factor in her decision to go public about problems at the social media company.</p>

The signatories, who include factchecking groups in India, Nigeria, the Philippines and Colombia, include examples of false content about the reign of the former Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos – whose son is running for office – and the amplification of hate speech against vulnerable groups in Brazil.

The signatories are from more than 40 countries with a range of funding backgrounds. They include: Full Fact, a UK charity, Washington Post Fact Checker, funded by the eponymous newspaper, Spain's Maldita, a factchecking foundation; and India Today, a unit within the privately owned TV Today Network.

YouTube's [community guidelines](#) state that "certain types of misleading or deceptive content with serious risk of egregious harm" are banned from the platform, which includes promoting harmful remedies or treatments and election interference. YouTube also points to the top ten countries for removed videos, which is dominated by non-English language-speaking countries such as Vietnam, India and Brazil.

YouTube has taken action to quell Covid misinformation and in October 2020 banned misinformation about Covid vaccinations, soon after Facebook had taken [similar action](#) on its own platform. A year later, it said it would remove videos that spread misinformation about all vaccines.

Responding to the letter, Elena Hernandez, a YouTube spokesperson, said the company had invested heavily in policies such as reducing the spread of "borderline" misinformation, a term for content that comes close to – but doesn't quite cross the line of – breaching the platform's guidelines.

"Over the years, we've invested heavily in policies and products in all countries we operate to connect people to authoritative content, reduce the spread of borderline misinformation, and remove violative videos," said Hernandez. "We've seen important progress, with keeping consumption of recommended borderline misinformation significantly below 1% of all views on YouTube, and only about 0.21% of all views are of violative content that we later remove. We're always looking for meaningful ways to improve and will continue to strengthen our work with the fact checking community."

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/12 Large explosion near Mogadishu airport
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/africa-explosions-somalia-mogadishu-al-qaida-86577ca5cad299f691aa187025aac7fd
GIST	<p>MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — A large explosion outside the international airport in Somalia's capital killed at least eight people and wounded nine others on Wednesday, a local doctor said.</p> <p>Dr. Abdulkadir Adam with Medina hospital shared the toll with The Associated Press. Witnesses at the scene said a passing U.N. convoy appeared to be the target in the Mogadishu blast near a checkpoint leading to the heavily fortified airport.</p> <p>The founder of the Aamin ambulance service, Abdulkadir Adan, tweeted that he was "deeply saddened by the loss of life and injuries" in Mogadishu. He posted a photo from the scene of a mangled vehicle.</p> <p>The al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab extremist group that controls parts of Somalia often carries out bombings at high-profile locations in the capital.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Terrorism comes for the metaverse
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/terrorism-comes-metaverse-180003311.html
GIST	<p>So far, Mark Zuckerberg's "metaverse" is fairly unimpressive, a digital realm where people don't have legs and the future looks a lot like grocery shopping. It's easy to treat the whole thing as a joke, even while the tech industry grinds out new products to turn a half-baked idea into our near-future reality.</p>

But what if it ends up a breeding ground for terrorist activity?

A trio of [terrorism researchers](#) at the University of Nebraska Omaha [is warning](#) about that possibility, conjuring up the specter of a zombified digital "Osama bin Laden" who radicalizes recruits while extremists plot and use their metaverse avatars to train together — but in separate actual locations — to carry out real-life attacks.

"A resurrected bin Laden could meet with would-be followers in a virtual rose garden or lecture hall," the trio writes at *The Conversation*. They added: "Violent extremists can plot from their living rooms, basements, or backyards — all while building social connections and trust in their peers. ... When extremist leaders give orders for action in the physical world, these groups are likely to be more prepared than today's extremist groups because of their time in the metaverse."

That's serious stuff. It's a bit more difficult to worry about other scenarios, which by comparison amount to digital graffiti: "A metaverse wedding could be disrupted by attackers who disapprove of the religious or gendered pairing of the couple," the researchers write. "These acts would take a psychological toll and result in real-world harm." Maybe, but it sounds an awful lot like the "[Zoombombing](#)" phenomenon that emerged during the early months of the pandemic — a problem, to be sure, but worthy of being lumped in with terrorist attacks?

In any case, the metaverse seems to be a new wineskin being filled with old fears. Back in 2013, documents revealed by the whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that U.S. and British spies [had infiltrated](#) *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* — online fantasy worlds with metaverse-style elements — to root out Islamic extremists.

They reportedly didn't find much. "For terror groups looking to keep their communications secret, there are far more effective and easier ways to do so than putting on a troll avatar," one observer noted. The increasingly regimented nature of the major online platforms means it's more likely that violent radicals will flee to the "[decentralized web](#)," and away from Zuckerberg's sandbox, to do their plotting.

The Omaha researchers don't offer solutions to problems posed by potential metaverse extremists, saying only that the challenge requires creative thinking. They do make one good point, however: Wherever human activity extends, humanity's occasional propensity to do evil will follow. Even when that place isn't real.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Taliban replace Afghanistan diplomats
SOURCE	https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/11/afghan-diplomats-taliban-reprisal/
GIST	<p>The Taliban have begun more aggressively to replace Afghanistan's exiled diplomats who have resisted the militant group's rule, current and former Afghan officials told <i>Foreign Policy</i>, using surprise diplomatic appointments and the threat of violence as a first step toward seeking wider political recognition.</p> <p>In the past several weeks, the Taliban have named new acting diplomats to lead Afghanistan's embassies in Iran and China. While it's not clear whether either host country approved the moves, they represent a possible warming of relations between the Taliban and countries outside of America's orbit. The moves also shed light on the Taliban's strategy of trying to quietly replace Afghan diplomats abroad with loyalists, even if foreign countries refuse to formally recognize Taliban rule in Afghanistan.</p> <p>On Monday, Afghanistan's top diplomat in China, Javid Ahmad Qaem, announced his resignation with a detailed note that hinted at deep-seated personal and professional frustrations. The Taliban had sought to undermine Qaem by tapping their own replacement, another former Afghan diplomat, Mahyuddin Sadat, as the embassy's first secretary. Just a few weeks earlier, the Taliban engineered a power grab over the embassy in Iran, reappointing Abdul Qayyum Sulaimani, a former diplomat, as charges d'affaires, making him acting ambassador in Tehran in December 2021.</p>

The moves have dealt another blow to hundreds of exiled Afghan diplomats who are hoping to hold out against the Taliban's brutal rule but who face growing financial pressures and threats of violence to give up their posts, including intimidation by former colleagues who have switched sides. Last week, Mohammad Fahim Kashaf, a former Afghan diplomat, entered the Afghan Embassy in Rome, claiming the Taliban had named him the new envoy. He attacked the current ambassador, Khaled Zekriya, before Italian police [escorted](#) him out.

The Taliban's emerging gameplan is to reach out to disgruntled, fired, and laid off Afghan diplomats in hopes of turning them toward the militant group, one Afghan diplomat said. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fears for their safety. It's an effort that plays on the strategic use of violence, experts said, just as the Taliban once ratcheted attacks up and down to strengthen their bargaining position at the negotiating table with the United States.

"Overall the Taliban strategy remains fight and talk, use violence when they have to, and try to negotiate a soft landing," said Asfandiyar Mir, a South Asia analyst affiliated with Stanford University. "So I'm sure they're talking to these ambassadors."

The resignation of Qaem, the second top Afghan envoy to resign in recent weeks, provides a glimpse into the increasingly dire conditions at Afghan embassies around the world, which have become the last functioning vestiges of the former Afghan government that collapsed as the Taliban took control of the country last August. Afghan ambassadors in dozens of countries have kept their [embassies running](#) for months since the Taliban's power grab, in defiance of the Taliban and despite no longer having a government in Kabul to represent.

In his handover note to the new Taliban envoy, Qaem said he and his staff had not been paid in six months. In the interim, Afghan diplomats in China had scraped by on a lump sum of money for living expenses. Qaem said he had left the keys to the embassy's five cars in his office and the keys to the embassy with the Qatari Embassy in Beijing. There is \$100,000 left in the embassy's bank account for the turnover, Qaem said. The rest of the embassy has cleared out since the fall of Kabul, so no diplomats will be in place when the new Taliban-backed ambassador arrives.

The United States and its allies have resisted recognizing the Taliban as the formal government of Afghanistan. Even some of Washington's rivals, including China and Iran, have balked at formally recognizing the Taliban despite cooperating more closely with the new regime in Kabul. The Iranian Foreign Ministry this week [said](#) the country is still "not at the point of officially recognizing [the] Taliban" after the Taliban's self-proclaimed foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, traveled to Tehran for meetings.

But the new moves also give insight into the Taliban's efforts to forge closer ties with China, which has expanded its diplomatic and economic influence in Central Asia amid the 20-year war in Afghanistan. With Afghanistan's economy in freefall after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban have looked to China for [economic lifelines](#) and diplomatic support as they seek international recognition.

"China has definitely been reaching out to the Taliban even before they took the reins of power," said Lisa Curtis, a former senior National Security Council official overseeing Afghanistan during the Trump administration.

"It's not surprising that the Taliban is trying to forge closer relations with China. They want Chinese investment and assistance first and foremost," said Curtis, now a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

For months, the Taliban have played a waiting game. "They're in a position of limbo," said Curtis of Afghan diplomats abroad. "Clearly the previous government is gone, and it's probably only a matter of time before diplomats at these embassies run out of money, which is what we saw with the Afghan ambassador and diplomats in China."

Now, the Taliban's strategy to undermine embassies loyal to the ousted government is emerging as the militant group begins trying to appoint and install its own diplomats abroad, especially in countries seen as sympathetic to its rule, such as Pakistan. The Taliban have [named](#) Suhail Shaheen, their spokesperson in Doha, Qatar, to represent their interests at the United Nations in New York, but the group can't seat him because the world body hasn't credentialed the Taliban. The previous Afghan ambassador to the United Nations, Ghulam Isaczai, quietly [resigned](#) in December.

There is increasing concern among Afghanistan's diplomats that the Taliban's push to restock embassies will extend to Central Asia. The Taliban are trying to send a first or second secretary to Uzbekistan, one Afghan diplomatic source told *Foreign Policy*, a sign they could take over the embassy there. The militant group has already taken control of the Afghan Consulate in Termez, an ancient Uzbek city along Afghanistan's border, allowing the Taliban to collect registration fees for cars that cross the border.

Taliban-allied insurgents have also tried to intimidate diplomats or take over embassies by force. In August, just after the Taliban takeover, a group broke into the Afghan Embassy in Brussels and vandalized the property. The threat of violence has forced many outspoken anti-Taliban ambassadors to clamp down on their tweets and social media posts against the group. Other diplomats have also begun to hunker down as threats and fears of random attacks from the Taliban have appeared to become more imminent.

In late December, the Taliban sent a letter to one European embassy accusing diplomats of breaching the norms of the Islamic-inspired government. The letter, sent from the so-called "Directorate of Ensuring Security of the Political and Consular Missions Abroad"—an ostensible branch of the Foreign Ministry that most seasoned Afghan diplomats had never heard of—named all of the embassy's seven Afghan employees, including the ambassador, diplomats, and technical staff, and demanded they immediately return to Kabul or face dire consequences or punishment at the hands of the Taliban.

While European governments haven't recognized the Taliban, diplomats fear that the militant group could pull an end run to take back control of Afghanistan's embassies on foreign soil by quietly appointing their own people to take over the embassy under the guise of lower-level technical staff, similar to their playbook in Asia.

In some European capitals, host countries have beefed up security at Afghan embassies at the request of the diplomats. But exiled Afghan diplomats are worried about attacks coming from Taliban sympathizers in Europe. Some have taken drastic personal precautions: cutting hours, doing consular services outside the embassies, and instructing staff to avoid crowded public places.

"They can attack you on the street and cause any sort of harm to you and your family," said one Afghan ambassador in Europe, speaking on strict condition of anonymity for fears of retaliation by the Taliban. "You're very vulnerable."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Panel approves release 5 Gitmo detainees
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/us/politics/guantanamo-releases-approved.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A U.S. government review panel has approved the release of five men who have been held for years without charge at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, according to a flurry of decisions released by the Pentagon on Tuesday, but they are unlikely to be freed soon as the Biden administration works to find nations to take them.</p> <p>The disclosure came on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the wartime prison, and President Barack Obama's last special envoy on the task, Lee Wolosky, used the occasion to urge the White House to shut down the operation.</p> <p>"Our longest war has ended, yet Guantánamo endures," Mr. Wolosky wrote in a quest column in Politico. "If these detainees had been white and not brown or Black, is there any realistic chance the United States — a country committed to the rule of law — would imprison them without charge for decades? I don't think so."</p>

Those recommended for transfer included three Yemenis, [Moath al-Alwi](#), [Zuhail al-Sharabi](#) and [Omar al-Rammah](#), and a Kenyan, [Mohammed Abdul Malik Bajabu](#). All are in their 40s. None of them were ever charged with war crimes and instead were held as “law of war” detainees, the U.S. term for prisoners of the war on terrorism.

The Defense Department also released an order approving the transfer, with security measures, of [Guled Hassan Duran](#), 47, of Somalia. His lawyers had earlier disclosed that he had been approved, making him the first detainee who was brought to Guantánamo Bay from a C.I.A. black site to be recommended for release.

Mr. Alwi, whom the review board deemed a low-level trainee with no leadership role in Al Qaeda or the Taliban, may be the best known of the five prisoners because of replicas of sailing ships he fashioned from objects in his prison cellblock. The models were the focal point of a show in New York on Guantánamo art, and the subject of an [opinion documentary](#) that imagined how he made them.

Diplomats working through country bureaus at the State Department, not a centralized Guantánamo office like the one Mr. Wolosky ran, have been seeking to make the arrangements. The plans have typically included pledges from the host country to restrict the detainees’ travel, provide opportunities for resettlement and sometimes enroll them in a jihad rehabilitation program, all aimed at preventing them from turning to anti-American activities.

It is against U.S. law to send Guantánamo detainees to Yemen, in part because it does not have a functioning government that can provide the security guarantees. So other countries would have to agree to take them in. Oman and Saudi Arabia have been key sponsors, with successful resettlement.

Of [the 18 men now cleared](#), half are from Yemen and one is from Somalia, another country on Congress’s no-transfer list, along with Libya and Syria. A citizen of Afghanistan has also obtained permission to leave with security arrangements, but his release would require negotiating with the Taliban, who now rule the country.

Mr. Wolosky’s comments about the continuation of the detention center echoed criticism from activists who this week staged 20th-anniversary protests, including a rally on Facebook rather than the plaza of the White House because of the rise of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

“The time has come to finish the yearslong process of restoring U.S. moral credibility by untangling the knots that we ourselves tied in Guantánamo,” he said.

Mr. Wolosky served in the Clinton, Obama and Biden administrations, most recently as a special counsel to President Biden on the resettlement of Afghan refugees. As the last Obama administration special envoy for the closure of Guantánamo, he attained the title of ambassador and had the reputation of being a tough negotiator who in some instances sought to send detainees to other nations for prosecution or preventive detention.

For example, he tried unsuccessfully in 2016 to get Israel to accept Mr. Bajabu for trial, on the basis that he was suspected of having a role in the [November 2002 car bombing](#) of the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel that killed 13 people in Kenya, and a failed surface-to-air missile attack on an Israeli airliner.

Mr. Bajabu was arrested in Kenya in 2007 and turned over to U.S. authorities. They considered him a facilitator for Al Qaeda’s East Africa affiliate who was involved in the attacks.

But the review board concluded on Dec. 27 that his release, with security assurances from a receiving country, was justified because he was a low-level extremist trainee before his capture. It also noted “the dissipation of the network of extremist associates with which he was previously involved.”

	<p>His lawyer told the board in September that Mr. Bajabu has a wife and three children in Somalia who were willing to relocate to Kenya, where he has “a large and loving family,” if he is repatriated there.</p> <p>The lawyer, Mark Maher of the London-based legal defense organization Reprieve, called him a peace-loving man who poses no threat to the United States and “can quote Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King like teenagers quote Taylor Swift.”</p> <p>The board has six members from the Departments of Defense, State, Justice and Homeland Security, as well as representatives from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Joint Staff. However, the six cabinet members make the ultimate decision.</p> <p>The last 39 detainees at the prison fall into three groups: nine who are held as law-of-war detainees, the 18 who are approved for transfer and a dozen who have been charged with war crimes, two of whom have been convicted.</p> <p>Among those still awaiting trial are Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and the four other men accused of plotting the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Pretrial hearings in the death-penalty case were scheduled for this week but canceled because of the rise in coronavirus cases at the base, which has instituted mandatory quarantines for all travelers upon their arrival.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Troops came home sick, govt. denies role
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/magazine/military-burn-pits.html
GIST	<p>The soldiers with inexplicable breathing complaints started appearing in Dr. Robert F. Miller’s pulmonology clinic in 2004, the year after Baghdad fell to invading United States forces. These new patients were active-duty troops from nearby Fort Campbell, men and women who came home from war with mysterious respiratory ailments. The base asked Miller, an unassuming and soft-spoken lung specialist at Vanderbilt University, to take a look.</p> <p>Miller was baffled to see formerly healthy soldiers gasping for air after mild exertion. Some of them had been close to the fire at the Mishraq sulfur mine outside Mosul, thought to be the largest release of sulfur dioxide ever caused by humans. But others had never gone anywhere near the burning mine. Some of them could no longer run or climb stairs, and yet their X-rays and pulmonary-function tests looked normal.</p> <p>Confounded, Miller decided to try something radical: He began ordering lung biopsies under general anesthesia to look for more subtle damage known as small-airways disease. Sure enough, the tissue revealed toxic lung injury, which Miller diagnosed as constrictive bronchiolitis. To the doctor, this meant two things: First, the soldiers were not exaggerating their symptoms. And more important, noninvasive screenings couldn’t be trusted to detect these new post-deployment ailments.</p> <p>Eager to share his discovery, Miller contacted doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. This led, at first, to what Miller recalls as an enthusiastic collaboration. Army doctors flew to Tennessee to review Miller’s biopsies, and together they went to Fort Campbell to develop a protocol for evaluating patients.</p> <p>That early collaboration collapsed, however, after Miller presented his findings to a large 2009 conference of doctors, including contingents from the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. In the following months, his Fort Campbell patients stopped coming for treatment. When Miller asked for an explanation, a Department of Defense official told him in an email that the abrupt change was because of a realignment in military command regions. Miller wasn’t convinced: He believes that senior officials realized that the implications of his research could be sweeping — and could stick the government with expensive medical bills for untold numbers of returning troops. Whatever the reason, he says, the military abruptly stopped cooperating or referring patients to Miller. “The D.O.D. said: ‘Well, we’ll take it from here. We don’t need to send any more people to Vanderbilt,’” Miller recalls. (A spokesperson at Fort Campbell said the base had decided to send patients, instead, to an Army medical center in San Antonio for treatment and study within the military’s health system.)</p>

Miller's breakthrough findings and what he described as the sudden end of collaboration with military officials marked an early clash in what would become a long, bitter struggle over ailments associated with military trash fires and other airborne toxins during America's post-Sept. 11 wars. More than 200,000 people who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan believe they suffer permanent damage from exposure to burn pits, as the military's notorious garbage-disposal fires are known. They describe ailments ranging from shortness of breath to rare cancers but have struggled to convince the government that shipped them off to war that their suffering deserves redress. Instead, veterans' pleas have been met with bureaucratic inertia and widespread perceptions of stonewalling. Researchers who uncovered early suggestions of links between burn pits and health problems say their work was discouraged or even censored by the V.A. At the same time, citing a lack of conclusive data, the V.A. was denying the vast majority of burn-pit-exposure claims. Since the first anecdotes of mysteriously sickened service members began to filter out of clinics in the early years of the war on terror, the battle over burn pits has unfolded as a bleak saga that brought together foreign wars and military contractors, health care dysfunction and distrust of government.

It was clear from the beginning that this new problem could be disruptive, costly and vast in scale. If burn pits were indeed causing health problems, a staggering number of service members — pretty much anybody who spent time on bases in Iraq or Afghanistan — could make a reasonable claim. What's more, because military trash fires were still common practice on overseas campaigns even as backlash to burn pits was rising back home, any acknowledgment that troops were getting sick could force the Pentagon to adjust the logistics of ongoing wars. Only in 2009 did the Pentagon begin to scale back the practice, which is still used when the military can't find another way to dispose of garbage. On top of the cost to taxpayers and disruption to war planners, burn-pit fallout threatened private industry: Many of the burn pits were operated by KBR, a powerful contracting company that won, and continues to win, billions of dollars in contracts from the Department of Defense.

Pieces of burn-pit legislation were periodically drafted in a show of support for the troops but never seemed to pick up much momentum. The most significant breakthrough came in 2013 when Congress ordered the V.A. to establish the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry so that veterans could log their symptoms. (Officials at the V.A. had fought against creating the database until lawmakers forced the department to do it, several former V.A. employees told me.) For years, that relatively minor concession was as close as the federal government came to a large-scale response to burn pits.

It would take a pressure campaign from an unexpected source before burn pits finally started to pick up political momentum. Starting in 2020, the comedian and political commentator Jon Stewart and a coalition of Sept. 11 first responders threw their considerable lobbying muscle behind the long-marginalized movement. These new allies proved remarkably effective. By the end of 2021, 16 distinct bills were introduced as lawmakers vied to affix their names atop a piece of burn-pit legislation.

The bustle of interest in Congress, in turn, sparked a rare reaction within the opaque and ponderous offices of the V.A. In August, breaking with years of precedent, the department abruptly reversed its position on the damages wrought by "fine, particulate matter," including burn pits. Veterans diagnosed with asthma, rhinitis or sinusitis within 10 years of returning from Iraq, Afghanistan or certain other foreign deployments are now presumed to have suffered respiratory damage during their service and are eligible for benefits.

In November, [President Biden, who has publicly blamed his son Beau's death — from glioblastoma brain cancer at 46 — on burn pits in Iraq](#), followed up by ordering the V.A. to look into potential links between toxic exposure and rare cancers.

While advocates cautioned that the expansion of V.A. benefits has so far been relatively modest, it's still a radical turnaround for a department that, until late in 2020, kept the same line of denial emblazoned on its website: "Research does not show evidence of long-term health problems from exposure to burn pits." The message to veterans had long been clear: You can't prove that military service made you sick, and that means your illness is not our problem. Now, suddenly, the V.A. had swung abruptly to align with the department's most vocal critics, openly acknowledging that respiratory disease was a likely result of airborne particulate exposure during deployment.

A burn pit is exactly what it sounds like: A hole is dug in the ground and filled with trash, including medical waste, vehicles and plastics. Then the whole mess is doused with jet fuel and set on fire. Operated in large part by KBR, the huge contracting firm that was enriched by lucrative wartime contracts, burn pits were a ubiquitous feature of the post-Sept. 11 wars — a primitive disposal method for the tremendous loads of garbage generated by occupying forces.

At least some of the health issues ascribed to burn pits were probably caused by particulate matter, smoke inhalation or air pollution breathed on deployment, and specialists are generally careful to refer to “toxic exposure” or “airborne hazards” instead of singling out burn pits. But returning service members and their families tend to zero in on the trash fires. Monstrous conflagrations consumed acres of American bases, sometimes adjacent to working and sleeping quarters. The troops grumbled about the noxious smoke but to no avail: The burn pits were considered an imperfect but inevitable way to avoid hauling garbage through streets held by hostile occupation.

To understand the scale and toxicity of burn pits, you have to realize how much material the United States dragged into these wars. Artificial villages hardened like scabs over the landscape in Iraq and Afghanistan. Teeming communities of trailers, air-conditioners, table-tennis sets, weapons depots, a thousand things fetched by armed guards in truck caravans that traveled over the weakened highways, cracking them apart.

Hundreds of thousands of troops passed through those bases, and that’s not counting the civilian bureaucrats and local employees, diplomats and contractors. There were hospitals, prisons, offices, garages, industrial kitchens, all of it generating waste of every imaginable kind, and nowhere to put it but into the fire. Some soldiers spent months in the thick smoke, inhaling particles small enough to lodge into tissue, pass through lungs and swim through the blood. The burn pits melted the mundane waste of the wars off the landscape and hid it deep in the bodies of the troops. According to V.A. estimates, about 3.5 million military members have been exposed to burn-pit smoke since the 1991 invasion of Iraq.

But when they got home, claims of burn-pit exposure were met with institutional skepticism at both the Pentagon and the V.A. Service members and veterans were dismissed as anxious or out of shape, prescribed psychiatric drugs and asked to produce trash-fire documentation they couldn’t possibly have: Where were they deployed? Where was the burn pit? Had they smoked or experienced stress? How did they know what had made them sick? From 2007 to 2020, the V.A. denied 78 percent of veterans’ disability claims mentioning burn pits, a senior V.A. official testified before Congress in September 2020.

KBR, meanwhile, fought a class-action lawsuit all the way up to the United States Supreme Court to avoid paying damages to sickened soldiers. In 2019, the court let stand a ruling that private contractors were protected by the same immunity that covers the military’s battlefield decisions.

Many Americans are under the mistaken impression that veterans receive free health care. They don’t. Combat veterans who were discharged in 2003 or later are entitled to five years of free V.A. health care. After that, they are eligible for free or subsidized treatment and disability benefits for any diagnosed health conditions or chronic injuries linked to their military service. But because burn-pit ailments were new, and therefore, research was scarce, veterans had little chance of meeting the threshold of proof tying their symptoms to deployment — a point the V.A. seemed keen to emphasize in the website message that categorically rejected any link between burn pits and illness.

David Shulkin, a doctor and hospital manager known for his patient-friendly policies, became under secretary for health at the V.A. in 2015 and ascended to the agency’s top job in 2017 — the lone holdover from the Obama administration appointed to a Trump cabinet position — only to be pushed out 15 months later. Since then, he has emerged as a passionate advocate for burn-pit victims.

“Simply outrageous,” he told me in August when I asked about the website’s message rejecting a correlation between burn pits and health issues. “It was a slap in the face to anybody who was suffering and to the families, and I was very outspoken that it needed to be removed.” I pointed out that the message

had stayed on the V.A. website all the way through his time overseeing the agency and had only disappeared in late 2020. Shulkin told me I was wrong. I assured him that I was not.

That's when Shulkin said that all through his three years in senior V.A. leadership, nobody had ever discussed burn pits with him. But this seemed impossible: During his tenure, the V.A. had already started logging details of toxic-exposure claims in its national burn-pit registry, and, in 2017, Shulkin signed off on the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's review of the use of the data. PBS, The New York Times and others had reported on the controversies around burn pits. The class-action lawsuit against KBR was winding through the courts, making headlines along the way. Shulkin had also visited a New Jersey research facility focused on studying airborne hazards and burn-pit exposure in 2016.

But Shulkin doubled down, even suggesting that the topic may have been purposely downplayed: "Burn pits weren't even an issue while I was there," he said. "There are very good mechanisms that prevent things from surfacing, and I can't say whether it was deliberate. There was no discussion or visibility on it."

I repeated Shulkin's description of V.A. silence about burn pits during a phone call with current V.A. officials. "I'd find it surprising," Dr. Patricia Hastings, the V.A.'s chief consultant for health outcomes of military exposures, finally said.

In months of reporting, I interviewed a range of current and former V.A. employees, both on and off the record, and ran into many professed gaps in knowledge. Nobody at the V.A. seemed willing or able to articulate a coherent explanation for the department's shifting position on burn pits. Officials pointed out that the agency was enormous, the largest after the Department of Defense, and that some of the clashes over the science had taken place a long time ago. The V.A., they said, has always prided itself on rigorous research, academic freedom and compassionate care for veterans. Over the years, the agency has commissioned four reports related to airborne hazards; none of them uncovered any connections between health problems and burn pits, officials said. Nevertheless, after reviewing the existing research in late 2020 and 2021, [the V.A. last year decided to reverse its position](#). The science, the V.A. said in a statement, "has changed and represents less of an abrupt shift than an evolution in the V.A.'s understanding."

The Miller biopsies have remained a landmark, albeit controversial, breakthrough in burn-pit research. Some returning soldiers grew so desperate to prove they were truly ill — not malingering or delusional, as other doctors had suggested — that they traveled to Tennessee and paid for a biopsy using private insurance. But Miller has also been criticized, in particular by military doctors, for encouraging patients with normal test results to undergo the painful and invasive procedure.

In the contentious realm of burn-pit research, doctors have squared off against one another with unusual rancor. The stakes are both professional and personal, with some scientists believing their life's work has been ignored or misused for political purposes. There are burn-pit believers (activists, their critics say) and burn-pit skeptics (obstructionists, the others say).

In 2013, after years of silence, Miller heard from the V.A.: He was one of two pulmonologists asked to develop a criterion to evaluate respiratory disability. But when it came to constrictive bronchiolitis — the disease Miller believed he found in his biopsies — the agency stymied his efforts to create a criterion, he says. In email exchanged that year, Miller pressed Dr. Gary Reynolds, a medical officer with the V.A.'s benefits administration, for an explanation, even threatening to "make a congressional inquiry," citing his past work with the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. But Reynolds deflected, citing "some unanticipated administrative issues." In an email to me, Reynolds said that he couldn't comment.

In the years since then, Miller has remained outspoken and doggedly weathered the resulting criticism. "It's horrible," he said of service members' struggle for care. "I know these stories, and I know how impaired they are, and I know how they've been treated."

The dearth of evidence was repeatedly invoked over the years as justification for denying burn-pit-related claims. V.A. officials had long maintained that there simply wasn't enough data to prove a link between

trash fires and health problems. And why not? One explanation upon which all of the doctors can agree: Symptoms might take years to manifest and evolve, and patients should be tracked for decades after deployment to get a full picture.

But that's not a complete explanation. Because the military knew (or should have known) the range of materials being burned, presumably the established knowledge behind the [Environmental Protection Agency's online warnings that burning plastic and trash "can be toxic,"](#) for example, could have been applied to the cases of the returning soldiers.

Instead, interviews with medical researchers suggest a troubling pattern of denial and cover-up. Several V.A. doctors told me that their bosses pressured them to ignore data pertaining to burn-pit exposure; prevented them from publishing findings; and threatened or retaliated against those who persistently argued for a link between such exposure and illness.

Dr. Anthony Szema was the allergy section head at the Northport V.A. Medical Center in New York from 1998 until he quit in 2015. In recent years, he and his team have studied lung tissue from returning service members in the brilliant X-ray beams of the National Synchrotron Light Source II. The metal-detecting beam lines, which are not generally used to study body parts, revealed a dramatic abnormality in patients' lungs: titanium bonded to iron in a fixed 1:7 ratio. This was shocking, Szema says, because the compound hardly exists in nature, suggesting man-made car parts or computer equipment.

Szema's team also exposed laboratory mice to dust samples that had been gathered by a colleague from war zones. As a control, they exposed other mice to dust from similar geological regions outside combat — inert titanium dioxide from Georgia clay; samples from a Montana titanium mine; dirt from Camp Pendleton in California. The pattern was clear: Lung tissues of mice and humans exposed to the war dust were marked with crystals. "Those crystals are metals, and they're from inhaling the dust and everything else that got into the dust," he said. "The burning smoke and the burning computers, the Humvee that blew up in the air."

Szema started investigating this issue to try to understand the unexplained breathing ailments he was seeing among post-Sept. 11 veterans. His 2011 analysis of health data from thousands of troops concluded that those who served in Iraq or Afghanistan were far more likely to struggle with breathing symptoms requiring lung-function tests — a phenomenon Szema's team called "Iraq/Afghanistan war lung injury." But his supervisors became angry about the team's findings, Szema says, and warned him that the V.A. wanted it "squashed." "They told me to change stuff in the paper, which I refused to do," Szema says. (A V.A. adviser says he raised concerns with Szema about his methodology but that he did not ask Szema to alter his findings.) After the research was published in *The Journal of Environmental and Occupational Medicine*, Szema's colleagues from the V.A.'s public-health office wrote a letter to the publication that criticized the paper for failing to adjust the data to account for respiratory risk factors. Szema rejects their criticism.

Szema is not the only V.A. scientist who says he was pressured over burn pits. In 2009, the V.A. began the National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans, a sweeping survey of 20,500 veterans meant to evaluate the overall health of those who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. When Steven Coughlin, the study's lead epidemiologist, began to analyze the results for publication, he found that service members who reported exposure to burn pits suffered higher rates of asthma, chronic bronchitis and other respiratory problems compared with troops who were not deployed. But Coughlin's V.A. supervisors ordered him to ignore that data, he said, and forbade him to publish any suggestions of links between burn pits and illness. When a defiant Coughlin included his findings anyway, he says, his supervisor edited out those sections. Outraged, Coughlin demanded his name be removed as co-author of the study. "They weren't publishing the results," Coughlin said. "They either manipulate the findings or they don't release them."

Coughlin left the V.A. in 2012 after becoming a whistle-blower. He testified to Congress the next year about what he described as the agency's mishandling of both burn-pit data and suicidal impulses among veterans. He lived briefly in his brother's basement before rebuilding his career in academic research.

“The V.A. has a not-so-subtle conflict of interest,” Coughlin says, echoing a complaint I heard frequently. The agency’s dual responsibility for paying out disability compensation and for research, V.A. critics say, puts the department at odds with itself. Current V.A. officials pushed back against suggestions of stifled research, insisting their commitment to science was unassailable. They also denied having any financial incentive to deny benefits, pointing out that the disability-compensation budget is separate from the research budget and that the two budgets do not affect each other. The V.A. and the Pentagon have recently collaborated on what officials say is a groundbreaking new data-gathering app (the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record) that will create a detailed portrait of every service member, including deployments, potential exposures and symptoms. This, they say, will help clear up the lingering ambiguity around toxic exposures. “We are taking this seriously and are actively engaged in outreach,” says John Kirby, the Department of Defense spokesman.

Dr. Cecile Rose occupies a somewhat singular position among the lung researchers I interviewed. As director of the Center for Deployment-Related Lung Disease at Denver’s National Jewish Health, a respiratory hospital that has received millions of dollars in Defense Department grants, Rose has treated hundreds of patients. She believes that the damage from airborne toxins is real and can be severe, and she told me that Miller’s controversial biopsies were “seminal.” But she objected to the suggestion that research had been stymied.

“It’s probably simplistic to say the V.A. has no interest in this or is just trying to bury it,” she said. Rose acknowledged the widespread perception of “nefarious efforts going on,” but suggested that researchers on both sides had taken hardened stances on a little-understood medical question. “There are people who I think have been kind of unpersuaded and unsympathetic and unconvinced from the outset and have brought bias to the discussion,” she said. “And there are people who are advocates.”

Rose seemed to be choosing her words carefully, and she asked several times what this article was going to say. When I described the other researchers’ run-ins with the V.A., she replied that she wasn’t the best person to comment. “Everybody has a conflict of interest here,” she said. “I mean, you know, people can argue that we get D.O.D. funding so we’re part of the problem.”

Perhaps the researcher least convinced of a link between burn pits and health problems is Dr. Michael Morris, a pulmonologist at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and a frequent critic of Miller’s biopsies. Having carried out a sweeping series of studies from 2011 through 2020 into the lungs of active-duty military members, Morris maintains there isn’t enough evidence to say that toxic exposure during deployment is causing disease. He feels strongly that Miller should not have ordered the lung biopsies. Morris suggested asthma, sleep problems, anxiety or depression as alternative explanations for the breathing complaints, adding that many of the patients are neither young nor healthy. “Just because you have a headache doesn’t mean you have a brain tumor, OK?” he said. “Just because you’re short of breath doesn’t necessarily mean you have lung disease.”

Morris described himself as a beleaguered researcher dutybound to follow the data to unpopular conclusions. He has been frustrated by the perception that his studies and those of others, which have not established links between burn pits and disease, have been largely ignored by the press and the public, even as critics accuse the Defense Department of inaction and indifference. “I don’t have any evidence that it’s definitely the burn pits,” he said. “I’d be the first to be honest with you and say, ‘Hey, I don’t know.’”

One day in 2008, a lawyer named Susan L. Burke picked up the phone in her Philadelphia office. A onetime military kid who spent her childhood on bases, Burke specialized in suing military officials and contractors. Now she found herself talking to a former KBR employee who said he had watched a dog pull a human arm from a burn pit in Iraq. The man said he was traumatized and that he wanted to sue his former employer. Burke took the case and, as word of the litigation spread, found herself flooded with other complaints about burn pits from sick veterans and contractors. By the following year, her clients’ grievances would be among 63 claims consolidated into a class-action lawsuit accusing KBR of negligence. Burke was one of the lead lawyers.

At the time of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, KBR was a wholly owned subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate Halliburton, which was run by Dick Cheney until he ran for vice president. When the [United States invaded Iraq, KBR received a no-bid contract capped at \\$7 billion to rebuild Iraq's oil infrastructure](#); the company also won a number of contracts to provide wide-ranging logistical services in Afghanistan and Iraq, including trash disposal.

The relationship between KBR and the United States government is close, occasionally contentious, and peppered with litigation. The government has repeatedly sued KBR for alleged malfeasance, including inflating costs, arming security subcontractors without authorization and taking kickbacks, although most of the cases were dismissed in court. KBR has also sued the government for access to documents it wanted to help defend against separate civil lawsuits, although none of the legal bickering has hindered the company from continuing to win government contracts.

By the time the burn-pit lawsuit reached the Supreme Court in 2019, more than 800 current and former service members, family members and former employees had joined as litigants. The case was regarded not only as a David-and-Goliath contest between veterans and a sophisticated corporate giant but also as a test of the legal protections a company might expect while engaging in war for profit.

The veterans had argued that KBR was functioning outside the chain of command, even operating some burn pits without military authorization. But the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals flatly rejected that argument, finding that KBR was following the instructions of the military and, therefore, could not be judged in civil court.

In the end, [the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, letting stand the appeals ruling that favored KBR](#). The case turned on the “political question” doctrine, which holds that battlefield decisions by the military can be overseen only by the White House or Congress, without second-guessing from the courts. If taken as precedent, legal experts say, the ruling would solidify an even greater degree of integration of for-profit companies within the military command structure. It also suggests that contractors in theaters of war exist in a legal twilight zone, unanswerable to either civilian or military court.

Military contractors have pressed for, and received, some measure of immunity as early as World War II, when the war effort leaned heavily on private industry to produce vehicles, weapons and hardware. Since 2001, that legal protection mushroomed as the military outsourced more and more of the tasks once performed by soldiers.

It's impossible to talk about the dynamic between the government and its contractors without acknowledging a broader reality: the personal relationships and professional crossover between military commanders and the companies that dangle a lucrative retirement for high-ranking officers looking to cash in on their experience.

Kerry Baker is a former V.A. policy chief who, in 2010, wrote a department-wide letter (which he says went largely ignored by V.A. clinicians) detailing the toxic exposure risks of trash fires. Baker told me that military officials “hated” the issue of burn pits and, like the V.A., had tried to downplay links between airborne toxins and health issues. At the time, he says, he assumed it was because the Pentagon didn't want to give people still deployed the idea that they would get sick. But he has come to think there was another explanation.

“I now think they were protecting their contractors,” says Baker, pointing out that the class-action lawsuit was already underway during his time at the V.A. and that military officials were providing testimony on behalf of KBR. (Other military officials testified on behalf of the plaintiffs.) “The more the lawsuit got traction, it seemed like the more the D.O.D. stepped up and defended them,” he said.

Chris Heinrich, a lawyer for KBR, gave a sworn deposition in 2010 acknowledging that, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, he personally pressured the Pentagon to sign an unusually broad indemnification clause as part of the contract to rebuild Iraq's oil infrastructure. The Pentagon ended up granting KBR sweeping

protection from lawsuits, including negligence or death, and agreed that United States taxpayers would reimburse KBR for any legal costs if anyone sued the company. (Philip Ivy, KBR's vice president of global marketing and communications, denies that KBR's lawyers coerced the Pentagon and says the indemnification for "extraordinary situations" was authorized under federal law.) The indemnification deal was classified until it was finally made public in 2012.

This was another way that KBR insulated itself from being held accountable. The oil contract did not cover the burn pits, but KBR claimed in a 2015 lawsuit filed against the Department of Defense that the logistical agreement that included garbage disposal also obligated the government to "reimburse KBR for costs incurred defending third-party tort suits." That means that, by the time all the lawsuits and legislation play out, taxpayers will be required to pay the original cost of KBR's contracts, the price of health care and benefits for troops disabled by burn pits and, finally, reimbursement for damages and any corporate legal fees paid out by KBR as the company fought against the veterans' claims. "This kind of reimbursement is not at all unusual," Ivy says. The Department of Defense declined to comment on its previous contracts with KBR, citing potential for future litigation.

KBR has toggled cannily between leveraging personal ties to the government and, when necessary, bringing to bear the impersonal might of expensive legal teams. A 2010 letter from KBR to the Army pressed for Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, former commander of the multinational forces in Iraq, to testify on behalf of the company in yet another lawsuit, warning "KBR has carefully refrained from pointing its finger at the United States as the culpable entity" and "KBR can no longer sit silent, and instead intends to aggressively make its case to the public." (A KBR spokesman said this was not a threat but an "affirmative statement" that KBR would "correct false and misleading statements.") Sanchez acknowledged under oath that KBR paid him \$650 an hour for time spent preparing and delivering his burn-pit testimony.

Sanchez testified that when problems with KBR arose, "I would call in my buddies, the retired general that was in charge of KBR, and we would have a session to sort out the issues." But for military leaders lower in rank, wrangling KBR was impossible. In 2006, Lt. Col. Greg Kleponis became the commander of the security unit in Camp Bucca, Iraq, a congested encampment containing a large United States-run prison (which would eventually gain notoriety as an Islamic State radicalization hub), a hospital, sleeping quarters for about 10,000 detainees and personnel and a foul-smelling burn pit run by KBR.

A kind of grim gallows humor infected the encampment, Kleponis recalls. A running joke held that the government forced soldiers to sleep near a burn pit so they would die too young to collect pensions. Kleponis complained to his own superiors as well as to the KBR supervisors on the site. He asked if the garbage could be taken elsewhere to burn or dump, but KBR balked at the idea. So Kleponis suggested they hire a local subcontractor to come and collect the trash. They refused. (Ivy says that the contractors didn't have the authority to make changes to military decisions about the burn pits.)

"I have zero power over what they serve for breakfast, let alone whether they're going to burn hazardous waste on our living site," Kleponis recalls of his KBR counterparts. "I'm sort of a pawn in the game, and they are too."

On a chilly morning in Washington last April, Susan Zeier, a graying grandmother from Ohio, put on a dead man's uniform and positioned herself on the sidewalk outside the V.F.W. office. The hem of the camouflage Army jacket dangled long down her thin legs, making her look like a child playing dress up.

The clothes had belonged to Zeier's son-in-law, a young man who survived Iraq only to die slowly of lung cancer back home, leaving Zeier's daughter a single mother. Zeier had stuck a sign to her back: "Ask me why the soldier who wore this uniform in Iraq is dead."

Zeier stood with a group of ailing veterans and the survivors of dead veterans who had traveled to the capital from places like Tennessee, Minnesota and New York. A few wore oxygen concentrators strapped to their torsos, hissing and sighing softly like a distant shoreline. These were the contemporary torchbearers of a sorrowful tradition stretching back to the enraged Revolutionary War militiamen who

barricaded a group of the founding fathers into the Philadelphia capital to demand unpaid wages: disillusioned veterans begging the federal government to take care of them.

Zeier had been trying for years to get the government's attention. Years before President Biden was elected, she drove to his book event in Pittsburgh and paid \$400 for a meet-and-greet ticket just so she could ask him, in person, to help burn-pit victims. Biden, she recalled, said: "I want what you want. I'm working on this."

But it was Jon Stewart who finally supercharged the burn-pit movement. As Zeier stood on the pavement last spring, Stewart was arguing her cause in a closed-door meeting with Jon Tester, the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. Stewart was accompanied by his lobbying partner, John Feal, a tough-talking demolition expert who lost a foot after it was crushed at ground zero only to emerge as a ruthless advocate for Sept. 11 first responders and, now, burn-pit victims. Nobody was surprised that Tester had agreed to see them; few in Washington were willing to risk snubbing the pair.

Stewart wasn't just famous; he was also feared, having shown himself willing to subject feckless politicians to public shame. A protracted [struggle to force Congress to pay for the medical costs of sickened Sept. 11 first responders](#) came to a head when a tearful and indignant Stewart dressed down lawmakers for their indifference. "You should be ashamed of yourselves," he told a half-empty chamber in 2019, "but you won't be." The video went viral and, the next month, [Congress approved permanent funding for the 9/11 victims](#). Only two lawmakers dared to vote no.

"Members of Congress wouldn't give us the time of day," says Rosie Torres, a founder of the advocacy group Burn Pits 360, when I asked her about Stewart's influence. "If you said, 'Here's a widow,' they'd have their staff playing goalie. And then Jon Stewart walks in, and they say, 'Absolutely,' and the whole staff wants to be at the meeting."

No matter whom I interviewed for this article — doctors and veterans; lawyers and scientists — they all, eventually, pointed to Stewart's involvement as a driving force of the long-awaited acknowledgment of burn pits as a legitimate health threat. And maybe it's true; maybe the science and the victims' stories were never going to be enough. Maybe it was always a matter of publicity and political appetite. "I've got one monkey trick," Stewart told me. "I can get a media organism to turn with me and to focus on something in particular. A moment in time. If we can make that moment count, maybe we can get something done."

With Stewart and Feal hounding lawmakers to take action, the V.A. went to Congress in May to ask for a grace period before imposing any new legislation, promising to use the time to review its own airborne-exposure policies. The new, more generous burn-pit coverage was announced three months later. In another indication of a changed federal approach to airborne hazards, Miller has recently been called to join a V.A. working group to study constrictive bronchiolitis. "I'm kind of being asked back to the table," he says.

But even Stewart has struggled to get a clear answer on what prompted the V.A.'s policy change in August. No significant research breakthrough had occurred; no study had suddenly proven toxic-smoke exposure to be more harmful than previously understood.

In a September interview [on his new current-affairs show](#), Stewart repeatedly asked Denis McDonough, the V.A. secretary, to explain the precise research metrics or standards that decided which ailments were "presumptive." Why had the respiratory conditions qualified while cancers and autoimmune diseases had not? "I'm asking them to go get as much science as there is on this," McDonough said.

"What's the bar you're looking for?" Stewart pressed. "If you don't know the answer, how do you know when you've found it?"

"I wish it were like a puzzle," McDonough said. "I keep asking the same series of questions. OK, so like, we've got all these pieces and just tell me where to put them and then let's figure out which piece we're missing and then we'll build that."

	<p>“This delay is killing people,” Stewart said.</p> <p>McDonough replied: “I’m not rebutting that notion.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 DOJ new unit to probe domestic terrorism
SOURCE	https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/589168-doj-establishing-new-unit-focused-on-domestic-terrorism
GIST	<p>The Department of Justice (DOJ) is launching a unit dedicated specifically to domestic terrorism, the department's top national security official told lawmakers Tuesday.</p> <p>Matthew Olsen, the assistant attorney general for national security, made the announcement as he noted that the number of domestic terror investigations launched by the FBI has more than doubled since March 2020.</p> <p>The DOJ already has a counterterrorism unit designed to handle both international and domestic cases.</p> <p>“I decided to establish a domestic terrorism unit to augment our existing approach,” Olsen said.</p> <p>“This group of dedicated attorneys will focus on the domestic terrorism threat, helping to ensure that these cases are handled properly and effectively coordinated across the Department of Justice and across the country.”</p> <p>Olsen said the U.S. continues to face an elevated threat from domestic violent extremists.</p> <p>“We've seen a growing threat from those who are motivated by racial animus as well as those who ascribe to extremist anti-government and anti-authority ideologies,” he said.</p> <p>Olsen’s testimony follows a memo issued by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on the anniversary of the Jan. 6, 2021, riot warning of an uptick in chatter on extremist online platforms, including threats against lawmakers.</p> <p>That memo, obtained by The Hill, said national security officials had no indication of a specific and credible plot.</p> <p>“DHS and FBI have identified new content online that could inspire violence, particularly by lone offenders, and could be directed against political and other government officials, including members of Congress, state and local officials, and high-profile members of political parties,” including outside of Washington, John Cohen, DHS’s head of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, wrote in the memo.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Court denies appeal: regretful IS bride
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/supreme-court-denies-appeal-regretful-islamic-state-bride-82201321
GIST	<p>BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to hear the appeal of a woman who left home in Alabama to join the Islamic State terror group, but then decided she wanted to return to the United States.</p> <p>The justices declined without comment on Monday to consider the appeal of Hoda Muthana, who was born in New Jersey in October 1994 to a diplomat from Yemen and grew up in Alabama near Birmingham.</p> <p>Muthana left the U.S. to join the Islamic State in 2014, apparently after becoming radicalized online.</p>

	<p>While she was overseas the government determined she was not a U.S. citizen and revoked her passport, citing her father's status as a diplomat at the time of her birth. Her family sued to enable her return to the United States.</p> <p>A federal judge ruled in 2019 that the U.S. government correctly determined Muthana wasn't a U.S. citizen despite her birth in the country. Children of diplomats aren't entitled to birthright citizenship. The family's lawyers appealed, arguing that her father's status as a diplomat assigned to the U.N. had ended before her birth, making her automatically a citizen.</p> <p>Muthana surrendered to U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces as Islamic State fighters were losing the last of their self-declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria and going to refugee camps.</p> <p>Muthana said she regretted her decision to join the group and wanted to return to the U.S. with her toddler child, the son of a man she met while living with the group. The man later died.</p> <p>Her current whereabouts aren't clear. Family attorney Christina Jump of the Constitutional Law Center for Muslims in America did not immediately return an email seeking comment Tuesday.</p> <p>The decision to revoke her passport was made under former President Barack Obama. The case gained widespread attention as former President Donald Trump tweeted about it, saying he had directed the secretary of state not to allow her back into the country.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/11 Southern Resident orcas record absence
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3300640/southern-resident-orcas-hit-puget-sound-absence-record-in-2021/
GIST	<p>2021 was a bit of a roller coaster year for the Southern Resident orcas.</p> <p>With just 102 days spent in the Puget Sound, they were in Washington waters fewer days than any other year on record.</p> <p>“2021 was a record-breaking year as far as Southern Resident killer whale absence from the Salish Sea,” said Erin Gless, director of the Pacific Whale Watch Association.</p> <p>This means it has been hard for researchers to determine how the Southern Resident orcas are doing, because they are simply not being observed.</p> <p>The hope is that the orcas have been off the coast of Vancouver Island because they have been able to find more Chinook salmon there, their main food source.</p> <p>However, while they do appear a little more robust than other years, their numbers are still at the lowest they’ve been in decades — the result of years of starvation as they struggle to get enough Chinook in the Puget Sound.</p> <p>At last observation, three orcas were in late-stage pregnancy — the final six months of an 18-month gestation period. But while it gives researchers hope that three are pregnant, there is no guarantee of a healthy calf.</p> <p>“What many folks don’t realize is that each year, we identify animals that are pregnant, and each year, sadly, they lose pregnancies,” Gless said. “And so, just because they get pregnant doesn’t mean that they actually carry that calf to term.”</p>

Unfortunately, because of starvation, miscarriages are common. The rate of miscarriage can be as high as one in two, Gless said. And after birth, orca babies have a hard time surviving the first two years of life, as seen when Talequah lost her newborn calf and carried it with her for weeks in 2018.

No calves have been seen since the three orcas were determined to be pregnant in September. Still, the fact that they were healthy enough to become pregnant is a good sign of health.

“Just because they’re pregnant doesn’t mean they’re having a calf successfully, but it means they’re pregnant. That’s the first step,” Gless said. “And so you have to celebrate every little victory.”

Taking action for Southern Resident orcas in the Legislature

Salmon recovery — and by extension, orca recovery — is expected to be a major theme in the new session of the Legislature, which began this week.

“This session is going to be really heavily focused on salmon — salmon, salmon, salmon,” Gless said. “And we’re very happy that that is getting the attention that it deserves.”

Governor Inslee proposed more than \$180 million for salmon recovery in his budget, in the hopes of building back up the orcas’ food supply. This is showing up in several bills already, including those aimed at salmon habitat recovery or commercial fishing regulation.

“It is our firm belief that that is the number-one thing that is affecting Southern Resident killer whale health right now, is a lack of salmon,” Gless said.

Gless said that we may also see legislation this year to regulate noise from large vessels, such as ferries and cargo ships. That underwater noise can keep orcas from finding what little salmon there is by interfering with their use of echolocation, their way of detecting food.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Bolivia gold mines poisoning indigenous?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/12/babies-here-are-born-sick-are-bolivias-gold-mines-poisoning-its-indigenous-people
GIST	<p>Outside a small brick house shared by four families, Daniela Prada, who is heavily pregnant, gathers guava leaves to make a tea for her two-year-old son.</p> <p>“My baby gets sick a lot,” she says, boiling a pot of water in her outdoor kitchen. “He always has diarrhoea and last night he had a fever. Most of the time I give him natural medicine.”</p> <p>In an identical house nearby, town leader Oscar Lurici says fevers are a part of life in Eyiyo Quibo village on the Beni River in northern Bolivia. People of all ages suffer from debilitating head and body aches, bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea, memory loss and tiredness. Some children show signs of cognitive development delays.</p> <p>“We do not know for sure what causes these sicknesses,” Lurici says. “We are starting to think this is all because of water contamination from the mercury found in the mining waste.”</p> <p>Lurici’s 17-year-old son, also called Oscar, began suffering from exhaustion, aches and trembling in early 2019. Various doctors diagnosed ailments such as Parkinson’s disease and anaemia. One suggested the illness came from the contaminated river water. Before the year was out, Oscar had died.</p> <p>Bolivia has long been criticised for using mercury in small-scale gold mining, and growing evidence shows that mercury contamination is causing illnesses in poor communities. Mercury is used across the country, in mining projects in the cordilleras of the Andes and on dredgers extracting gold from the sediment at the bottom of waterways. The uncontrolled disposal of mercury waste creates toxic flows in Bolivia’s river systems.</p>

Known as the “people of the river”, the Esse Ejjas survived as nomads for generations, hunting and fishing along the region’s waterways. After settling in Eyiyo Quibo, men and boys continued to fish, spending days travelling the river, camping on its banks and working in pairs to fill their long, narrow wooden boats with catfish and piranhas.

In cases around the world, including a study in the Brazilian Amazon published by the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health in 2020](#), researchers have found fish to be heavily contaminated with mercury, and believe fish-based diets in mining areas are causing increased mercury levels in indigenous people. This could explain some of the illnesses in Eyiyo Quibo.

In 2019, representatives of the Bolivian volunteer organisation Reacción Climática took hair samples from women at Euiyo Quibo, including Prada. In total, 64 samples were taken from Euiyo Quibo and Portachuelo, another Esse Ejja community 380km (235 miles) north, for a study by the International Pollutants Elimination Network (Ipen) to evaluate levels of mercury in people living near small mines in four Latin American countries: Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia.

[Published in June 2021](#), the study found that women from the Esse Ejja communities, the only participants not living near a mine, had by far the highest levels of mercury – on average almost eight times the accepted threshold of one part per million (ppm), with one sample reaching 32.4ppm. The results suggested a correlation between mercury in the body and fish consumed.

The findings rang alarm bells internationally. In September, the UN special rapporteurs on toxics and human rights and on the rights of indigenous peoples, Dr Marcos Orellana and José Francisco Cali Tzay, submitted a [letter to the Bolivian government](#) calling out Bolivia’s inaction on the regulation, use, and trade of mercury, with a focus on small-scale gold mining. They gave Bolivia 60 days to respond. In Eyiyo Quibo, where families eat river fish daily, fear is rising. “Sometimes babies here are born deformed, or sick,” Prada says, sitting on the dirt floor of her kitchen. “Now I worry about the health of my children. I worry that they get sick, that they will die from the contaminated fish.”

On 8 December, on a hotel patio in Rurrenabaque, north Bolivia, a group of worried Esse Ejjas people huddled around a laptop to hear Orellana speaking at an online event hosted by Reacción Climática and the Bolivian Documentation and Information Centre (Cebid).

“Here is where a community lives their life according to their ancient traditions in close relation to their natural resources, including rivers, and they may have been contaminated by activities that are being carried out in other places and for the benefit of other people,” Orellana said. “That is a clear example of environmental injustice.”

Orellana’s main issue was the Bolivian government’s lack of engagement with the Minamata Convention on Mercury, an agreement of 128 countries to curb or eliminate almost all uses of mercury, including in small-scale gold mining, which came into force in 2017. Bolivia ratified the agreement in 2015, committing to develop and execute plans to reduce and control mercury markets and protect vulnerable populations from contamination.

Yet while neighbouring countries such as Peru have been curbing or eliminating mercury imports, a [Cebid report](#) from September 2020 showed that the mercury economy in Bolivia was larger than would be required for the country’s gold output, suggesting Bolivia was now the regional hub of illicit sales.

Two days after the online event, Orellana received a response from the attorney general of Bolivia. The letter highlighted state pilot programmes working with miners to promote new technologies to reduce mercury use, and reiterated the laws and Bolivian constitution that call for the protection of the rights and health of indigenous people. Importantly, the document referred to a two-year project to develop a national action plan to address mercury contamination under the Minamata agreement, and another to accelerate the meeting of the commitments of the convention through a multimillion-dollar regional project with its neighbours.

	<p>The recent international attention has prompted regional and national mining cooperatives to ask the Bolivian government for alternatives to mercury to use in gold mining. “We do not intend to do more damage. On the contrary we want to do responsible mining,” Vicente Choque, president of the Federation of Gold Mining Cooperatives of the North of La Paz, said in a press conference after the government’s response. “We ask the mining authorities, the government and others to propose policies to solve these problems.”</p> <p>For now, the importation, sale, use and re-exportation of mercury in Bolivia remains uncontrolled and the Beni River continues to be poisoned by gold mining activity, its waters reaching some of the world’s most biodiverse regions, where mining activity encroaches on the homes of an unmeasurable number of indigenous people, including the Esse Ejjas.</p> <p>In Eyiyo Quipo, the fishers continue to bring in their catch for families who rely on the fish for food and income. Prada continues to pick medicinal plants to ease her son’s fevers and pains, and worries about what illnesses she may be passing on to her unborn child, due this month.</p> <p>Orellana welcomes the goldminers’ statement as a positive step, but says the government needs to “establish a policy that allows it to decisively control and reduce the use of mercury in small-scale gold mining”.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 First Black woman on US quarter
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/us/maya-angelou-quarter.html
GIST	<p>The writer and poet Maya Angelou has become the first Black woman to have her likeness depicted on the quarter, the first in a series of coins commemorating pioneering American women that began shipping this week, the U.S. Mint announced Monday.</p> <p>“It is my honor to present our nation’s first circulating coins dedicated to celebrating American women and their contributions to American history,” Ventris C. Gibson, the deputy director of the Mint, said in a statement. “Maya Angelou,” she added, “used words to inspire and uplift.”</p> <p>Ms. Angelou’s landmark 1969 memoir, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” documented her childhood in the Jim Crow South and was among the first autobiographies by a 20th-century Black woman to reach a wide general readership.</p> <p>In it, she writes, “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”</p> <p>Ms. Angelou recited a poem at President Bill Clinton’s first inauguration, in 1993, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2011.</p> <p>Ms. Angelou, who died in 2014 at 86, was “one of the brightest lights of our time — a brilliant writer, a fierce friend and a truly phenomenal woman,” Mr. Obama said at the time.</p> <p>The quarter featuring her likeness — created by Emily Damstra, a designer, and Craig A. Campbell, a medallist artist — depicts Ms. Angelou with her arms uplifted, in front of a bird in flight and rays of sunlight streaking out from behind her. The images were both “inspired by her poetry and symbolic of the way she lived,” the Mint said.</p> <p>Ms. Angelou is featured on the “tails” side of the 25-cent piece; the “heads” side includes a portrait of George Washington.</p> <p>The coin is the first in the American Women Quarters Program, a four-year effort in which the Mint will issue five quarters a year to honor women in fields including women’s suffrage, civil rights, abolition, government, humanities, science and the arts. This year’s other honorees are Sally Ride, the first American</p>

woman in space; Wilma Mankiller, a Native American activist; Nina Otero-Warren, a leader in New Mexico's suffrage movement; and Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American film star in Hollywood.

The Mint has previously issued coins featuring Black women, including a commemorative gold coin in 2017 that [depicted Lady Liberty as a Black woman](#).

The suffragist Susan B. Anthony was the first woman to be featured on a circulating U.S. coin; silver dollars with her image were first released in 1979. (A [dollar coin](#) featuring Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who helped Lewis and Clark across the plains, was produced from 2000 to 2008.) In 2003, the Mint [released a quarter featuring Helen Keller](#), the writer and activist for the disabled.

On paper currency, the abolitionist Harriet Tubman is expected to replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill by 2030, according to the Treasury Department.

Representative Barbara Lee, the California Democrat who sponsored a bill promoting the new coins' creation, said in a statement last year that she was proud to have led an effort honoring the "phenomenal" women who were often overlooked in American history.

She added: "If you find yourself holding a Maya Angelou quarter, may you be reminded of her words, 'be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.'"

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HEADLINE	01/11 Mystery: Canada source gas leak explosion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/canada/wheatley-ontario-gas-explosion.html
GIST	<p>WHEATLEY, Ontario — Electricity is cut off. Guards sit in cars on every corner. Hundreds of people are out of their homes, some without access to their clothing or belongings.</p> <p>And officials are frantically working to unravel the grim mystery of what exactly caused a gas explosion last August in Wheatley, Ontario — and how to prevent another explosion from happening.</p> <p>More than four months after the blast shuttered Wheatley's downtown and injured 20 of the town's 2,900 residents, the authorities still don't know where the gas leak came from, or why it happened.</p> <p>Residents and local officials are examining the risks associated with the town's history as a site of 19th-century gas wells, vestiges of the area's oil and gas industry. Many are now grappling with whether the town's center, which was formally recognized as a post office in 1865, should be permanently abandoned.</p> <p>"It still is one of those like really surreal things where you tell people like, yeah, the town blew up," said Stephanie Charbonneau, a schoolteacher who was forced to flee her house with her family. "Who knows what's going to happen at the end of all of this? What is Wheatley going to look like?"</p> <p>In the 1890s, gas wells were dug to supply heat and power to homes and businesses in and around Wheatley, which is in southwestern Ontario on Lake Erie. Over time, the wells became obsolete and buildings were constructed directly on top of them; the wells' locations were loosely, if at all, documented.</p> <p>Before the blast, Wheatley was mostly known for its Lake Erie fishery; a shipyard managed by Steve Ingram; and a lakeside provincial park. Few people in the community knew about the gas wells, or that an explosion had leveled a meeting hall in 1936. Stories of gas leaks from the town's oldest residents and newspaper accounts of older explosions begin circulating only after the August explosion.</p> <p>The first sign of trouble was on June 2, when Whit Thiele, a local business owner, went to investigate a foul odor in the basement of a downtown commercial building he owned. There, he saw water pouring through cracks in the foundation and through a drain in the floor before pooling into a fizzing mass.</p>

Mr. Thiele felt ill, became woozy and had to be revived by firefighters who evacuated the area around the office.

Sensors were then installed and quickly began detecting hazardous gases, leading firefighters to evacuate the area around the building twice more during the summer.

Nearly three months later, on Aug. 26, Mr. Ingram of the shipyard and his wife, Barb Carson, were getting ready for dinner at home when firefighters again began taping off an evacuation zone because of a gas leak.

“Well, here we go again,” Mr. Ingram recalled saying to his wife that evening. “Sooner or later this place is going to blow up.”

Suddenly, the sound of the explosion filled the air. The windows of the Ingrams’ home bent in and then popped outward, miraculously without breaking, as the shock wave toppled their belongings throughout the house. While insulation and other building materials began drifting down from the sky, the couple grabbed their phones and iPads, and fled wearing only T-shirts and shorts.

It was Mr. Thiele’s building that had blown up, taking down an adjacent pizzeria and laundromat as well a newly opened motel and bar. A surveillance camera across the street captured how a tongue of orange flame shot out of the building and then got sucked back inside before blasting the buildings into the sky.

Local officials quickly opened an investigation. Using ground-penetrating radar, they discovered the site of an old well under a paved parking lot behind the explosion site. Closer to the site, the ground continued to burp gas about every 40 days, which hinted at the source of the gas leak, and also spurred fears of another explosion.

But further investigating seemed to raise more questions than answers.

Don Shropshire, the chief administrative officer for Chatham-Kent, the regional municipality that governs Wheatley, said recent excavation work at the blast site has uncovered a second old gas well that may be leaking. Ontario officials have said there may be a third old well still hidden somewhere downtown.

“I’m reasonably confident that they’re going to find the source of the gas,” Mr. Shropshire said. “Whether or not it can be mitigated — that’s an entirely different question.”

While experts from Alberta, the capital of Canada’s oil and gas industry, have been brought in to assess how and why the gas is surfacing, the threat of another explosion has slowed their progress.

About 300 people are still not allowed to return to their homes, and 38 of Wheatley’s businesses remain closed. There’s no estimate for when, or if, everyone will be allowed to return home permanently — or whether the destroyed buildings can even be rebuilt. Mr. Shropshire said it may prove impossible to ever safely reopen the area around the blast.

Wheatley residents have gone from shock to dismay to anger that more hasn’t been done to solve the mystery of the explosion or to start working on repairs. The province has committed about \$3.96 million in assistance, but several shop owners said they have yet to see any of that money. They believe individual payments will be far short of what they will need to restart business.

“I try to keep my anger at a level,” said, Mr. Ingram, who has been allowed to return to his house only once, for one hour in early December, to gather up some winter clothing. He added, “I can’t even drive down and look at my house because my wife just bursts into tears.”

At a heated public meeting in November, local officials acknowledged the frustration and anger. But they also emphasized the complexity of the problem and said it will take time to solve it.

	<p>“I don’t want anyone to guess what the problem is, dump concrete on it and 60 years from now my grandkids who could be living in Wheatley have the same darn problem again,” Melissa Harrigan, a member of the town council, said at the meeting. “I am so sorry that it is disrupting your lives in so many ways I can’t imagine, I truly can’t, but I can say we’re trying.”</p> <p>Who bears responsibility for the cost of all this is unclear. The companies that drilled the wells are long gone. There is talk that lawyers representing Wheatley residents will soon ask a court to approve a class-action lawsuit against the municipality, which owns the parking lot covering one of the wells.</p> <p>The gift and custom woodworking shop that Tracey Declerck owns with her daughter still sits boarded up, and full of merchandise, immediately across the road from the blast site. “We’re little people, that’s my livelihood over there,” Ms. Declerck said in December while buffeted by the wind off Lake Erie. “Am I supposed to go get another job until they fix this?”</p> <p>Ms. Declerck said she was concerned that the blast may have left her shop’s building structurally unsound. Like many people in Wheatley, she’s skeptical that a permanent fix for the leaking gas will ever be found.</p> <p>Mr. Thiele, the business owner, said that he believes business insurance may become unaffordable in the town, and that public confidence will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to restore.</p> <p>“I can’t imagine anybody building a building there and feeling safe,” he said.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/11 KCSO: arsonist targets Fred Meyer stores
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/authorities-searching-for-arsonist-targeting-three-different-fred-meyer-stores
GIST	<p>King County Sheriff Deputies believe a serial arsonist is starting fires in front of shoppers at local Fred Meyer stores.</p> <p>Investigators said he's not trying to hide his brazen crimes.</p> <p>Since the first of the year, fires have been set inside three Fred Meyer stores in Maple Valley, Kent and Renton.</p> <p>It’s an arson spree that is just as brazen, as it is bizarre.</p> <p>“This kind of behavior, this kind of damage, it’s scary,” said Fred Meyer shopper Sam Vergara. “Especially at your local grocery store. This is the last thing you’d expect.”</p> <p>In plain sight—with no regard to who’s around— or who’s watching, deputies say a serial arsonist walked into three grocery stores, grabbed whatever he could find, then ignited the items.</p> <p>Investigators say he even torched clothes and a bag of charcoal from the store.</p> <p>“It’s shocking and upsetting because this is my neighborhood store and I’m here all the time, and I don’t want this to happen to anyone or anywhere,” Vergara.</p> <p>“I’ve never heard of anything like this happen before,” said shopper Jordan D’Angelo.</p> <p>Deputies say the suspect hit the three grocery stores, three days in a row on the first, second and third of January.</p>

“This is one that they haven’t seen too often,” said Sgt. Tim Meyer with the King County Sheriff Department.

Investigators said typically arsonists do their crimes in hiding—but not this guy.

“Boy, this isn’t that case. This is a person who wants to draw attention to himself and to his crimes. He’s almost asking to be caught,” said Sgt. Meyer.

Deputies say the suspect has distinctive shoes, a tattoo on his left hand and an injury above his left eyebrow covered with some type of a bandage.

Investigators said the suspect is also associated with a dark-colored four-door sedan, although he may ride public transportation.

Shoppers are adding the grocery store as one more place to stay vigilant these days.

“You never know what’s going to happen and when it’s going to happen so it’s always good to keep your guard up,” said D’Angelo.

Deputies ask that anyone with information about the suspect to please contact the King County non-emergency number at 206-296-3311. People can share anonymous tips with Crime Stopper of Puget Sound via P3Tips.com or using the P3Tips app on your mobile device.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Officials warn: bomb-making surges
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/bomb-incidents-bomb-making-surge-us-officials-warn-rcna9781
GIST	<p>Wracked by paranoia, in thrall to various conspiracy theories, Anthony Quinn Warner parked a recreational vehicle in the middle of a tourist district in Nashville, Tennessee, early on Christmas Day 2020 and set off what authorities say was the biggest vehicle bomb explosion in the U.S. in 25 years.</p> <p>More than 60 buildings were damaged, including a key AT&T cellphone facility, resulting in service cuts across three states. In part because Warner broadcast a warning before the bomb went off at 1:22 a.m., he was the only person who was killed. But it was something of a wake-up call for law enforcement.</p> <p>Among the alarming elements was that a lone disturbed individual was able to build, test and detonate such a large and sophisticated device using materials he bought in retail stores, much like two anti-government radicals did when they blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.</p> <p>As part of its response, the Department of Homeland Security has teamed up with the FBI to publicize Operation Flashpoint, the latest version of a long-standing effort by the government to urge local merchants to report suspicious purchases of household materials that can be used to build bombs. It comes as the Justice Department is reorganizing itself to better fight domestic terrorism.</p> <p>“Right now, we have about 250,000 stores nationwide that sell products containing these explosive precursor chemicals,” Lisa Parpachate, a supervisory special agent with the FBI’s weapons of mass destruction directorate, told NBC News. “We need them to report when they see suspicious behaviors around this. We have nefarious actors and bad people that want to buy these products specifically for the chemicals in them and then use them to make bombs to potentially harm the public.”</p> <p>Bomb incidents are rising sharply in the U.S. — there were 428 in 2020, according to DHS, up by 71 percent from the year before. And it’s happening amid heightened government concern about the rise of domestic extremism, which officials say now drives the most pressing terrorist threat to Americans’ safety.</p> <p>Matthew Olsen, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department’s National Security Division, told Congress on Tuesday that he was creating a domestic terrorism unit and that the number of</p>

investigations by the FBI into suspected domestic violent extremists had more than doubled since the spring of 2020.

“The threat posed by domestic terrorism is on the rise,” Olsen told the Senate Judiciary Committee. “We face an elevated threat from domestic violent extremists — that is, individuals in the United States who seek to commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of domestic social or political goals.”

Most of the bomb incidents weren’t terrorism; the list includes incidents in which thieves tried to blow open ATMs, for example. But the two explosive devices placed outside the Republican and Democratic headquarters in Washington, D.C., the night before the Jan. 6 riot — crimes as yet unsolved — were homemade pipe bombs, officials say.

“Certainly in my professional career, I think this is the highest it’s ever been,” said David Mussington, the executive assistant director for infrastructure security at DHS’ [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency](#), known as CISA. “These are risks to the American people and to critical infrastructure.”

Chuck Leas, who runs Operation Flashpoint for CISA, said many of the bombs are built with “products we use every day in our home.”

“They’re safe to use, but bad actors can take them and use them as not intended,” Leas said. “Different quantities, different combinations can be used to make an explosive. What we’re trying to do is, look at the suspicious purchasing behaviors that people do in the stores and then have them reported to 1-800-Call-FBI. It’s really important to ‘see something and say something.’”

The list of potential bomb ingredients is long, and it includes obvious items, such as ammonium nitrate fertilizer, kerosene and hydrogen peroxide, and less obvious ones, like flour, cinnamon and cocoa, according to [government documents](#).

Officials say big hardware chains like Home Depot and Lowe’s understand suspicious purchasing patterns and how to report them, so they are focusing on local merchants, conducting a series of road shows around the country to raise awareness.

At the FBI’s explosives training range in Quantico, Virginia, analysts study the impact of various sizes of homemade bombs by building and detonating them safely.

“It doesn’t take a lot, at all, to create a bomb that’s going to hurt people, potentially,” Parpachate said. “That’s why this is so important. ... The bomb threat is there. It’s not going away. It’s big.”

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HEADLINE	01/11 ‘Crime tourists’ target D.C. wealthy Asians
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/11/burglaries-crime-tourists-target-asians/
GIST	<p>Detectives crept into the parking lot of a Days Inn in Alexandria one night in March and surreptitiously attached GPS trackers to a white minivan and a gray sedan, according to a search warrant.</p> <p>The operation was the culmination of a years-long investigation into a skilled burglary ring, one that authorities say netted about \$2 million by focusing on a very specific target: high-end homes of Asian and Middle Eastern families in the D.C. suburbs.</p> <p>The investigators didn’t know who the burglars were, but they had spent months painstakingly following a trail of digital breadcrumbs across the country to this nondescript motel off Interstate 395.</p> <p>When the vehicles pulled out with GPS devices activated, law enforcement officers soon stumbled onto something far larger than a local break-in crew. They had uncovered a sophisticated criminal phenomenon with roots in South America and a reach around the world.</p> <p>Authorities call them “crime tourists.”</p>

Law enforcement experts say cells of professional South American burglars, particularly from Colombia and Chile, are entering the country illegally or exploiting a visa waiver program meant to expedite tourism from dozens of trusted foreign countries.

Once here, they travel from state to state carrying out scores of burglaries, jewelry heists and other crimes, pilfering tens or hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of goods each year, the FBI estimates. Experts said the groups often operate with impunity because they have found a kind of criminal sweet spot.

Bail for nonviolent property offenses is often low, so an arrested burglar often quickly gets bond and skips town for the next job, experts said. The crimes often don't meet the threshold for the involvement of federal authorities. And they attract less attention at a time when U.S. authorities are contending with a rise in homicides.

Dan Heath, a supervisory special agent with the FBI's criminal investigations division, said "South American theft groups," as the agency calls them, are a growing problem across the United States — and in countries including India, Britain and Australia, where they often employ similar tactics.

"They represent an enormous threat right now in our country," Heath said. "They are tending to thread the needle in avoiding both state and federal prosecution."

'Ghosts'

On a road in Great Falls, the large brick homes top \$1.5 million and sit deep on well-manicured lots. It's here in February 2019 that a South Asian family came home one night to find their residence ransacked.

Burglars had broken through a glass door at the back of the home sometime between 5:30 and 10:30 p.m. and made off with gold jewelry and a large safe. The losses were staggering, adding up to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The pattern was quickly becoming familiar to Fairfax County police: an expensive home; Asian or Middle Eastern residents; a rear door or window smashed; and jewelry and luxury goods taken but expensive electronics left untouched.

The robberies had begun four months earlier, but after nearly two dozen of them, Fairfax County police were no closer to finding the perpetrators. There would be roughly two dozen more burglaries over the next two years without much more progress. The lead detective, Samuel Song, referred to the perpetrators as "ghosts."

Detectives would eventually conclude that the burglars were researching targets on the Internet, surveilling the homes to determine the owners were away and then striking quickly, making them difficult to catch.

Detectives think Asian and Middle Eastern families were targeted because burglars believe they sometimes keep family wealth in gold and jewelry or have large amounts of money on hand because they may run businesses that rely on cash.

What Song and other investigators didn't know at the time was that the burglaries in Fairfax County might be just the tip of a nationwide operation. Fairfax County police said authorities have linked members of the group to break-ins in Georgia, and also said they believe people associated with the cell have connections to similar cases in Texas, South Carolina and North Carolina. They weren't talking about dozens of burglaries. They were dealing with hundreds.

And that was just one cell.

Another based in New York and New Jersey was operating in Fairfax and Montgomery counties around the same time and employing similar methods, according to court records. Experts said many more may be circulating the country at any one time.

They often employ cunning tactics. One group in California used jammers that allowed them to block key fobs from locking cars so they could burglarize them. Others were able to identify and target traveling jewelry salesman by looking for people parking rental cars near jewelry shops and then following them.

An FBI agent in Southern California said one cell cut power to a jewelry shop and waited overnight for the backup batteries on the alarm system to drain. The burglars then cut a hole in a roof to gain access to the store, brought in a generator and used power tools to hack open a 5,000-pound safe. They made off with \$1.2 million in jewels.

Heath said cells typically consist of two to eight members who link up or were recruited in Colombia or Chile before traveling to the United States explicitly to commit crimes. Some return home after a string of burglaries, but others attempt to remain in the United States illegally and live here permanently.

Law enforcement officers said they have not found evidence the cells are connected to gangs, drug traffickers or organized crime.

In the United States, experts said many burglars obtain fraudulent Puerto Rican documents to try to disguise their true identities and avoid deportation, since Puerto Ricans have U.S. citizenship.

Crime tourism has been around since at least the 1990s, but it has recently seen a major expansion. Experts said they have noticed a sharp increase in Chilean crime tourists in the past five to seven years because the nation was included in a visa waiver program in 2014.

The Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) allows citizens from 40 nations to be prescreened to travel to the United States for tourism or business for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa.

Experts said those travelers undergo less scrutiny than those who have to obtain visas, and some with criminal intent take advantage of that to enter the country.

Jorge Canelas, a press attache with the Chilean Embassy in D.C., said Chilean officials are sharing information with U.S. authorities and have stationed an investigator at the embassy to combat the problem.

Canelas said there is "active cooperation between Chilean police with American counterparts at federal and state levels, as well as continuous information and coordination between Chilean officials with Homeland Security, FBI and other agencies on this matter."

Colombia is not part of the program, so crime tourists usually sneak into the United States illegally, overstay a visa or travel on fraudulent documents.

FBI Special Agent Daniel Gimenez in the Dallas field office said crime tourism has been lucrative for some cells, particularly those targeting jewelry salesmen. He's found each member can make \$20,000 to \$100,000 per job in groups he has investigated in Texas.

"These subjects were clean subjects who lived for the most part in suburban neighborhoods in nice houses," Gimenez said. "They have kids going to private school. They are setting up Christmas lights one week. The next [week], they are traveling to a different part of the country to rob someone."

The break

Fairfax County police detectives were still grasping for clues in January 2020, when a sheriff's deputy hundreds of miles away in suburban Atlanta stopped to help two men whose white Infiniti had broken down.

The men told the Forsyth County deputy they were Puerto Rican and one said they were driving home from his girlfriend's house, but the deputy grew suspicious. The men were wearing warm, dark clothing and one had brush and twigs on him, according to a search warrant.

The deputy did not find any stolen items when he searched their car, but there were gloves and masks in the glove compartment, according to the search warrant. The men weren't arrested, but they were now on law enforcement's radar.

A month later, both were charged following a break-in attempt in the same county. This would turn out to be the break investigators in Fairfax County had long been hoping for.

Song, the lead detective, had already turned to an investigative tool that has exploded in popularity in recent years. He filed a search warrant with Google for a list of all registered mobile devices that had been active in a zone around a handful of the Fairfax County homes that had been burglarized.

Two of the cellphone numbers that were returned matched those of the two men who were arrested near Atlanta, according to a search warrant. More probing showed that one of the men had used his debit card to purchase screwdrivers and flashlights near the sites of two of the Fairfax County burglaries, according to a search warrant.

Cellphone data would reveal an additional surprise: The men appeared to still be active after their arrests.

Song began tracking one man's phone. It was pinging in Houston, but Song testified during a preliminary hearing that he watched it move state by state from Texas to Virginia in late March.

Police sprang into action.

Song assembled a surveillance team and stationed its members in the area around Fairfax City, where there had been a number of burglaries, he later testified. Police hoped to finally catch the burglars in the act.

Shortly after 3 p.m. on March 27, a member of the team spotted a white Chrysler minivan near where the phone was pinging, Song testified. One of the occupants of the vehicle appeared to be one of the men arrested outside Atlanta.

The surveillance team eventually followed the minivan and a Chrysler sedan driving with it to the Days Inn in Alexandria, Song testified. Song got a warrant that night to outfit the vehicles with GPS devices, which allow more precise tracking.

The surveillance team resumed following the vehicles the next day, following them at a distance into an upscale Vienna, Va., neighborhood. Soon after, a South Asian homeowner who was vacationing in Chicago got an alert from her home camera system and pulled up the feed on her phone, the woman later said in an interview.

"I saw two guys on the video in ski masks," she said.

She notified police.

	<p>Fairfax County police confirmed that a break-in happened at her 6,000-square-foot home before they stopped the minivan and sedan nearby. Song testified that police found necklaces, bracelets and other jewelry that belonged to the Vienna homeowners in a bag underneath a seat.</p> <p>All four men in the vehicles were arrested: Mario Valencia Asprilla, Jhonny Valencia-Valencia, Diego Montano Chasoy and Freddy Hernandez Angulo. All four turned out to be Colombian, police said. A fifth member of the group, Josue Rodriguez Rolon, was arrested in June. It remains unclear how they entered the country.</p> <p>Rolon got out on bond and is now considered a fugitive, and Montano Chasoy was deported, but the other three remain in custody, according to court records. Attorneys for the men declined to comment or did not respond to requests for comment. All three are scheduled to stand trial this year in Fairfax court on multiple burglary charges and other counts.</p> <p>All told, police allege the cell has been linked to more than 50 burglaries with \$2 million in losses locally. The other ring that was operating in Fairfax County and Montgomery counties was tied to nearly 50 others totaling \$1.6 million, authorities say. Members of the latter ring have been convicted in Montgomery County.</p> <p>The victim in the Vienna burglary said the experience has left her family afraid. She spoke on the condition that she not be identified for fear her home might be struck again.</p> <p>“They don’t just take your material,” she said. “They take your safety.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Neo-Nazi group leader jailed 7yrs for plot
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3308145/washington-neo-nazi-group-leader-sentenced-to-7-years-in-prison-for-intimidation-plot/
GIST	<p>A Washington leader of a Neo-Nazi group was sentenced Tuesday for his role in a multi-state plot to threaten and intimidate journalists and anti-Semitism advocates.</p> <p>In September, a federal jury found 25-year-old Kaleb Cole guilty of several counts related to his involvement with the group Atomwaffen Division.</p> <p>“Kaleb Cole helped lead a violent, nationwide neo-Nazi group. He repeatedly promoted violence, stockpiled weapons, and organized ‘hate camps,’” said U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. “Today the community and those Mr. Cole and his co-conspirators targeted stand-up to say hate has no place here. He tried to intimidate journalists and advocates with hate-filled and threatening posters, tried to amplify their fear. Instead, they faced him in court and their courage has resulted in the federal prison sentence imposed today.”</p> <p>In September 2019, the Seattle Police Department served an Extreme Risk Protection Order against Cole, given the serious risk that he posed to public safety, according to court documents. After police seized a stockpile of weapons from him, Cole fled to Texas with another member of the group.</p> <p>Evidence at trial showed that Cole and other members of the group tried to intimidate journalists and advocates by delivering posters containing threatening images to their homes in January 2020.</p> <p>Three other co-conspirators — Cameron Shea, Johnny Roman Garza and Taylor Ashley Parker-Dipeppe — previously pleaded guilty and have since been sentenced.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Omicron wreaks havoc California prisons
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/11/omicron-covid-california-prisons-staff-cases-surge-us

GIST	<p>California prisons have reported a staggering rise in Covid cases among staff this month, as the highly contagious Omicron variant has sent infection cases surging across the US.</p> <p>Staff infections increased 212% in January with more than 3,800 active cases in dozens of state facilities. The surge comes amid debate over a federal judge's order that all prison staff must be vaccinated, a mandate facing legal challenges from the governor and the corrections officer union.</p> <p>Currently, 69% of prison workers are fully vaccinated, according to the California department of corrections and rehabilitation, although the percentage varies drastically from prison to prison. At three facilities, fewer than 50% of staff are fully vaccinated, according to the department.</p> <p>Meanwhile, 80% of inmates in state prisons are fully vaccinated. As cases have risen among the workforce, state prisons have reported 2,358 active infections among incarcerated people over the last two weeks. Infections among incarcerated people rose 301% between 26 December and 2 January.</p> <p>The state announced last week that it would suspend visits at every facility for 15 days in order to reduce the spread of infections.</p> <p>"CDCR recognizes visiting is an important way to maintain family and community ties. At the same time, our first priority is the health and safety of those who live in and work in our facilities," the department said in an announcement.</p> <p>With 257 active staff cases, the California healthcare facility, Stockton, which houses incarcerated people with long-term medical and mental health needs, currently has the most staff cases of any state prison facility. The prison has a staff vaccination rate of 84%, the highest in the state – workers at prisons with healthcare facilities are required to be vaccinated.</p> <p>The surge comes as cases rise across California due to the Omicron variant. This weekend the state reported more than 300,000 new cases. Omicron appears to cause less severe illness, particularly among the vaccinated, but it has led to a steep rise in infections that is straining California's health system.</p> <p>Attorneys for inmates have warned that unvaccinated prison staff could lead to another deadly Covid surge in state facilities, and alleged that workers are failing to undergo twice weekly testing as required.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the legal battle over a vaccine mandate for prison workers is still under way. In October 2021, a federal judge ordered that all prison workers must be vaccinated because of the risk they pose to incarcerated people. Gavin Newsom, the California governor who had previously ordered Covid-19 vaccines or testing for all state workers, sought to appeal the mandate.</p> <p>A federal appeals court in November temporarily blocked the judge's order, which was supposed to take effect this month. The appeal hearing will be scheduled in March.</p> <p>Along with corrections officers, law enforcement across California has pushed back against Covid vaccine mandates. The Los Angeles police union sued over the city's requirement that all employees be vaccinated or have an approved medical or religious exemption, claiming that the order violated their civil rights. This week a federal judge dismissed the lawsuit.</p> <p>Since the start of the pandemic, 268 people incarcerated in California prisons have died of Covid-19 and more than 54,000 have been infected. Forty-nine prison staff have died of Covid.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Aboriginal activists fight back brutality
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/aboriginal-activists-australia-fight-back-police-brutality/story?id=82202796
GIST	David Dungay Jr. was forcibly removed from his Long Bay jail cell in Sydney in December 2015 because he wouldn't stop eating biscuits, according to news reports at the time . The 26-year-old was pulled from his cell by five guards and held down by the guards' hands and knees, as seen in the body camera footage.

His mother, Leetona Dungay, has been fighting for reform since that led to his death six years ago.

"You can see him ... being subdued by police officers, shouting, 'I can't breathe, I can't breathe,'" Sarah Collard, a reporter for Australia's National Indigenous Television, said in an interview with ABC News. "He does that more than a dozen times, and it seems to fall on deaf ears. You know, no one really does anything."

Dungay became unresponsive just minutes after he was apprehended by guards. He was pronounced dead shortly thereafter, according to the Coroner's Court of New South Wales, which also said he died of cardiac arrhythmia.

Corrective Services New South Wales, which runs the facility Dungay died in, has acknowledged "there were operational practices in use at that time of Mr. Dungay's death ... that may have contributed to his death."

The agency said it's since made changes to policy and training procedures, such as developing a new course for officers covering the use of force on inmates.

However, Dungay's tragic story is just one of many -- of aboriginal Australians in the country's criminal justice system -- Leetona added.

"It's very devastating for all of us family to hear that cry for mercy," she continued. "And that cry, cry a slow death, agonizing death. How can they be so cruel?"

She said she hopes that the anti-police brutality movements in the U.S. and subsequent conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd will encourage others in her fight for justice for Dungay.

"I'm speaking for David -- he can't speak no more. I know he'd want me to continue to keep busy and keep things going -- make sure all our people are safe again," she said.

Indigenous Australians make up just 3% of the population but are about 30% of the prison population, according to [the Australian Institute of Criminology](#), which makes them among the most jailed people in the world.

The institute also reports that Indigenous Australians also represent 18% of deaths in prisons and 22% of deaths in police custody. In 2020-2021, among 66 deaths in Australian prisons, 12 were Indigenous persons.

Activists say Australia's historically discriminatory policies towards Indigenous persons play a key role in perpetuating a racially oppressive criminal justice system.

Between the early 1910s and the 1970s, children of aboriginal descent were removed from their homes and families by the federal and state government, as well as by churches. The [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#) reports that these children were adopted by white families or raised in institutions where they were taught to abandon their culture and sometimes their given names.

These children are called the "Stolen Generation."

"They wanted Australia to be a white Australia. They wanted to breed us out," said Uncle Widdy, a survivor of the Stolen Generation whose full name is James Michael Welsh.

"I got taken away from my mother with six other brothers and sisters, seven of us altogether, removed from my mother," he said. "They separated me and my brother from the rest of the family and sent us up to this place that we called the Kinchella Boys Home. It was never a home. It was an evil place."

Generational trauma and the cycle of poverty, unemployment and discrimination -- all of this has impacted the aboriginal community to this day and can be reflected in the carceral system, according to Collard. "I don't know of an indigenous family that hasn't been impacted in some way by intergenerational trauma. Education is not nearly as high, unemployment, poverty and suicide. ... These are all issues that many indigenous families grapple with."

Widdy said his trauma led to into alcoholism and run-ins with the law. Now, 10 years sober, he's working on breaking that cycle.

The Australian government has acknowledged the plight of Indigenous Australians.

In 2008, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a landmark speech called the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples. It included an apology to the Stolen Generations, and is now considered a defining moment in the country's history.

When asked why it took so long to apologize, Rudd told ABC News' Britt Clennett that it can be hard for people in power to take responsibility.

"Australians can be a stubborn lot -- by which I mean white Australians -- and it's hard for any people to recognize that they've done wrong by others," Rudd said. "In the United States, you see the same in terms of African Americans. You see the same in terms of Native Americans. But Australians are pretty slow learners as well."

Some 13 years later, Rudd said there's still significant much work to do -- at all levels -- to prevent deaths in custody.

"When we look at incarceration rates for aboriginal people, which are abominably high, there's a sequence of events, poor health to start with. Poor education leads to poor employment, leads to people living a life of petty crime," Rudd said. "This is intensified in Indigenous Australia."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Terror charge South Africa parliament fire
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/terrorism-charge-suspect-south-africa-parliament-fire-82196241
GIST	<p>CAPE TOWN, South Africa -- A homeless man accused of setting a fire that destroyed part of South Africa's historic Parliament complex was charged with terrorism Tuesday and sent to a psychiatric hospital for a month for assessment.</p> <p>Zandile Mafe, 49, appeared in a courtroom in Cape Town for a bail hearing, when the terrorism charge was added to his indictment. Mafe was already charged with housebreaking with intent to steal, theft, two counts of arson and possession of an explosive device when he appeared in court for the first time last week.</p> <p>Prosecutors now contend that Mafe had intended to "deliver, place, discharge or detonate" the explosive device at the Parliament complex.</p> <p>The Parliament precinct in Cape Town was ravaged by a major blaze, which Mafe is accused of starting early on Jan. 2. It took firefighters four days to completely extinguish the fire. It destroyed the main chamber of the National Assembly building, where South Africa's Parliament sits, and also caused extensive damage to other buildings in the 130-year-old complex, which has hosted the national legislature since the time of British colonialism in the late 1800s.</p> <p>In all, 300 firefighters, some atop cranes, worked for more than 70 hours to tame the blaze. No injuries were reported as Parliament was closed for the holidays.</p>

The size of the fire and the extent of the damage immediately raised concerns there had been an intentional attack on South Africa's seat of democracy.

Mafe, who was described as homeless in his first court appearance, was arrested at the scene on the day the fire started and found with an explosive device, authorities said. The investigation has been taken over by a South African police unit that deals with high-profile crimes, and it said there could be more arrests.

Mafe has denied the charges against him and a defense lawyer claimed he is being used as a scapegoat to cover up failings in Parliament security.

On Tuesday, the judge ordered that Mafe be sent to the Valkenberg psychiatric hospital in Cape Town for a 30-day assessment. Prosecutors had submitted a report from a doctor who diagnosed Mafe with paranoid schizophrenia, prosecution spokesman Eric Ntabazalila said.

Mafe had threatened to go on a hunger strike if he wasn't released on bail, his lawyers said, but a decision on his bail was postponed until his psychiatric assessment was complete.

Questions remain over how Mafe got into the complex and why the Parliament fire sprinkler system didn't work.

Government minister Patricia de Lille said at the time of the fire that a water valve had been turned off. But a preliminary report into the blaze pointed out some failings in Parliament's fire safety plan and said parts of the fire sprinkler system hadn't been serviced as often as they should have. The report also noted the system's water valve should have been locked in the open position.

There was another unexpected development in the case when lawyer Dali Mpofu, a former chairman of an opposition political party in South Africa, joined Mafe's legal team as his chief defense lawyer. Mpofu is also defending former South African President Jacob Zuma in his corruption trial.

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